

# The First Bereavement

by John MacDuff

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*Bereavement can be a means to wean us from earthly affections and bring us back to God, and it is a call to surrender to His will and give ourselves to His service.*

**Scripture:** Ruth 1:20, Psalm 23:4, Psalm 30:5, Psalm 34:18, Isaiah 41:10, John 14:18, Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 1:3, Hebrews 4:16, Revelation 21:4

**Topics:** "Grief And Loss", "Comfort In Sorrow"

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## Description

John MacDuff preaches about the solemn hour of first bereavement, offering consolation and guidance to those experiencing deep sorrow and loss. He emphasizes the need to turn to God in times of trial, acknowledging the pain and heartache of losing a loved one. MacDuff encourages seeking comfort in God's promises, trusting in His wisdom and love even amidst profound grief. He reminds listeners of the sanctifying purpose of afflictions, urging them to draw closer to God and find solace in His presence. The sermon concludes with a message of hope, pointing to the eternal joy and peace awaiting believers in heaven.

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## Transcript

This is a solemn hour on which you have entered. The shadows of death for the first time are falling around your dwelling. Often before have you heard of trial. You may have visited over and over again the house of affliction. You may even have dealt out lessons of comfort to others. The doors of neighbors and friends you have seen darkened with bereavement, but the 'King of Terrors' has until now passed you by. Your turn has at last come--the 'spoiler' has broken into your fond circle.

The gourd is withered, the 'beautiful rod' has been broken. Your heart is smitten like grass. For the first time yours is a house of death, yours the bitterness of a First Bereavement. By the help of Him who is the healer of the broken-hearted, I would desire to pour some drops of consolation into your wounded bosom. This little book is intended to be seen by no eyes but weeping ones. It addresses no hearts but broken ones. It is to speak of sorrows with which a stranger cannot comprehend.

The world at such a time is often unwilling to make allowances for the sacredness of grief. He who wept at the grave of Bethany puts no such unkind arrest on the outflowings of sorrow. He 'wept with those that wept.' He has told us to 'go and do likewise.' I know not what this your first lesson in the school of Bereavement is. It may be 'the desire of your eyes taken away by a stroke.' It may be a beloved wife or husband, the sharer of your every joy and sorrow, suddenly and mysteriously removed, and you are left to

shed the tears of disconsolate widowhood.

It may be some fond parent, whose smile gladdens and hallows every memory of the past, and now you find yourself treading orphaned and alone the remainder of the pilgrimage. It may be some darling child, who has imperceptibly been entwining its every heartstring around you, wrenched from your embrace; a little light extinguished in your dwelling; the favorite star of the firmament quenched in the darkness of death; one of those whose names are touchingly described as 'always on gravestones; and their sweet smiles, their heavenly eyes, their singular words and ways, among the buried treasure of yearning hearts'.

In how many families do you hear the legend, that all the goodness and graces of the living, are nothing compared to the peculiar charms of the one who has died! Added to all this, the trial may have come with appalling suddenness. The hurricane may have swept your loved one down in the midst of brightest sunshine. Yesterday all was joyous and happy; today you are hurled by one terrible blow from the pinnacles of earthly bliss. Seated amid the wreck and ruin of all that on earth was held dear, -poor, lonely, desolate, you can say, with the touching emphasis of the broken-hearted Patriarch, 'I am bereaved!'

The yoke, too, may have been early put upon your neck, or the summons may have come at the time when the joy of your heart could be least spared; when most prized, most needed, most loved! It may have been some cherished flower, rich with future promise, which has in a night drooped and withered and fallen; or some life of signal usefulness to the church or the world. Ten thousand withered sapless trunks in the forest left untouched by the axe; the freshest and strongest and greenest marked out first to fall!

What! can it be? Is it indeed a sober truth? a sad reality? Or may it not prove some wild dream, some feverish vision which the night will dispel? Will not the morning chase away these terrible pictures of untold desolation? Alas! the morning comes, but with it the waking up only to a more vivid consciousness that all is too painfully real. These grey tints of early dawn are falling on a silent grave! 'Joseph is not, and Simeon is not.' With the drooping and blighting of that cherished gourd, 'There's not on earth the living thing To which the withered heart can cling.'

How strange and chilling are the feelings with which you find yourself now amid the world's familiar din and bustle! The unsympathizing crowd, all unconscious of what is transacting within your threshold, are hurrying by as before. They are exchanging with one another the same joyous smiles; they are clad in the same gay attire, the same merry chimes mark the passing hour, the same 'ringing laugh of childhood' is heard in the streets; and yet to you, all is deep despondency, over with inveterate sadness; every scene and association which whispers joy to others, reads but a homily of sorrow to your aching heart.

You now can well understand words in the vocabulary of sorrow which once seemed strange 'Wilderness world,' 'Valley of tears.' How can they call this world, you were once led to ask, 'wilderness,' and 'tearful,' which is sparkling on every side with tints of loveliness and vocal with joy? Right well do you know it now! Every flower has faded on your path. The silent chamber--it echoes to your lonely voice. The happy fire-side circle--there is a vacant seat. The favorite walk, the cherished haunt--the smile that made it so is fled.

Ah! life has indeed become like the 'flat, bare, oozy tide-mud, when the blue sparkling wave, with all its company of gliding boats and white-winged ships, the music of oars and chiming waters, has gone down.' Material nature itself, the earth around you, the very firmament above you, seem to have shared in some terrible catastrophe, as if blanched and colored with ashes. You breathe a different air, you are lighted by a different sun; in one terrible sense is the Scripture saying expounded, 'old things have passed away, and

all things have become new.'

Reader, I can imagine you now, solitary and alone in your chamber, your eye dim with weeping; your mind filled with ten thousand conflicting feelings to which you dare not give utterance; the holy visions of the past flitting before you like shadows on the wall; the future all darkness and mystery. Your pining heart in the first gush of its bitterness turns away, refusing to be comforted; the feelings of an old sufferer are too truthfully the transcript of your own. 'Call me not Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me' (Ruth 1:20).

You may be even unable at first to get any comfort at the mercy-seat. You seek in vain to buffet the surges of grief; there is no light in the darkness, no break in the cloud, deep is calling unto deep. Be comforted! The Lord will command his loving-kindness in the day-time, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayer to the God of my life. Yes! O you afflicted, tossed with tempest and not comforted, unschooled and undisciplined in these fiery trials; He who brought you into the furnace will lead you through!

He has never failed in the case of any of His 'poor afflicted ones' to realize His own precious promise, 'As your day is, so shall your strength be.' All is mystery and enigma to you now, nothing but crossed plans, and blighted hopes, and a future of unutterable desolation. But He will yet vindicate His dealings. I believe even on earth He often leads us to see and learn 'the needs be;' and if not on earth, at least in glory, there will be a grand revelation of ineffable wisdom and love in this very trial which is now bowing your head like a bulrush, and making your eyes a very fountain of tears.

But though I have dwelt on the depth of your bereavement, I do not write to make more tears to flow. My design is rather to dry them; to mitigate these aching pangs, and lead you submissively to say, 'Your will be done.' It is not a time when the mind is able or disposed to follow pages of continuous thought. Let me only throw out one or two simple reflections for your meditation, which I pray the Holy Spirit the Comforter to bring home to you. May 'the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulations,' make usable to 'comfort those who are in any trouble, by the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted of God.' (2 Cor. 1:3,4.)

#### A FIRST BEREAVEMENT

Was it not needed? Has not the world been becoming too much for you; engrossing your affections, alienating your love, dimming your view of 'the better country'? Ah! commune with your own heart, and say, was not this (terrible though it be) the very discipline required? Less would not have done, to wean me from the poor nothings of earth. I was lulled in a guilty self-security. I was living in a state of awful forgetfulness of my God, insensible of His mercies, unmindful of His goodness, taking my blessings as matters of course; a secret atheism! And, more than this, of the awful magnitude of 'things not seen' I had no vivid consciousness. I felt as if surely death could never disturb my dream of happiness.

He had been going his rounds on every side, but I never could realize the time when the terrible invader could rush upon my beloved circle and make such a gap as this!

Dear Reader! if such be anything of a truthful picture, I ask you, was it not kindness, unspeakable kindness in your covenant God to break through with a voice of thunder, this perilous dream? to bring back 'by terrible things in righteousness' your truant, wandering, treacherous heart, and fix once more your traitor affections on Himself as their only satisfying portion? 'Your Heavenly Father never thought this world's painted glory a gift worthy of you, and therefore He has taken out the best thing it had in your sight

that He might Himself fill the heart He had wounded with Himself.' (Evans).

The threads of life were weaved into too bright a tissue, God had to snap them.

The loved one you are now mourning was a clay idol. He had to break it in pieces. He had to drag it from the usurped throne that He might resume that throne Himself. He gave you prosperity but you could not or would not use it for His glory. It was a curse to you! It was that awful thing, 'unsanctified prosperity.' You were [are] living on the borders of that terrible state 'because they have no changes, therefore they fear not God.' He would not allow you to be left alone, to settle in the downy nest of self-ease and forgetfulness.

He has roused you on the wing, and pointed your upward soarings to their only true resting-place, in His own ever-lasting presence, and friendship, and love.

'Ah! it is indeed humiliating, ' says the same holy man whose words we have last quoted, 'that we require so many stripes to force us, as it were, to God, when there is enough in Him to draw us to Himself, and to keep us with Himself forever!' But better surely to have all these stripes than to be left unchecked in our career of forgetfulness. It has been well said, 'the sorest word God ever spoke to Israel was, 'Why should you be stricken any more?' This wayward heart was throwing out its tendrils on every side and rooting them down to earth.

He had to unroot them--to wrench these groveling affections from the things that are of 'earth, earthy,' and fasten them on Himself as their all in all!

A FIRST BEREAVEMENT! Was there not graciousness in it? At first sight this may appear a strange admission to demand. There may seem to be no star in that black sky, no alleviating drop in the bitter, bitter cup. But see that you do not give way to guilty murmurings, lest a worse thing come upon you; lest God may show you 'greater things than these!' Pause and ask, have there been in your affliction no mitigating circumstances, no gracious consolations, 'no tempering of the wind to the shorn lamb,' no 'staying of His rough wind in the day of His east wind?'

'Have you ever marked,' says a writer who knew well herself what the furnace was, 'have you ever marked His gentleness when bringing a painful message? how he usually calls by name, 'Abraham, Abraham!' 'Moses, Moses?' Yes! I verily believe that there are few afflicted children of God but can echo the expression of the tried Psalmist, 'I will sing of mercy and of judgment.' (Mercy first, then judgment!) I ask you in this hour to think of your mercies, and let each of them be a voice of comfort to you.

What are they? Have there been kind friends sent to share the bitterness of your sorrow, and give you the tribute of their valued sympathy? Ask those who, from peculiar circumstances, may have been denied this boon; who in their hour of trial have been left unbefriended to weep in silence and in solitude their first tears. Is there no mercy in this? Again, your chief blessing may have been snatched away from you, but many precious ties yet remain; and you will find, as one most blessed and endearing element in the loss you have sustained, that it knits together the broken links in holier and more sacred bonds than before.

Ask those who have carried their all to the grave who have been left like a solitary tree of the forest alone--all around them swept down--ask them, if it is no blessing to have the cherished voice of doubly-endearred survivors to mingle together common tears, and recount the hallowed memories of the departed? Or, better than all--Is the loss you mourn the eternal gain of the absent one? Oh! ask those who

have to muse in dumb agony over the thought of those gone unprepared to meet their God, ask them--Is it no small mercy (no, rather is it not the highest and most exalted of all consolations, that which disarms death and bereavement of all its bitterness,) that 'the loved and lost' are the crowned and glorified?

'We may not here below,' says Cyprian, 'put on dark robes of mourning, when they above have put on the white robes of glory.' Does not this hush all murmurs and dry all tears, that the great end of their being has been faithfully fulfilled? 'The birds are fled away, having outgrown our care, to fill a bough in the tree of life, and charm on to follow after them.' 'She is not dead, the child of our affection, But gone into that school Where she no longer needs our poor protection, But Christ Himself does rule. In that great cloister's stillness and seclusion, By guardian angels led, Safe from temptation, safe from sin's pollution, She lives whom we call dead.'

THE FIRST BEREAVEMENT! Is there not a specially loud Voice in it? Yes! I say so with a solemn conviction of its truth. You may have heavier trials and severer losses than this, but never will God's voice speak louder to you than now. It is the loudest knock that can be heard at the door of your heart! Felix might have heard another (perhaps even a more powerful) sermon from Paul 'on righteousness, temperance, and the judgment to come,' but I believe he would not have again trembled, as he did, when for the first time these appalling realities were presented to his mind.

A first trial, then, has its solemn responsibilities! Let it not die away, like the subsiding thunder, unsanctified and unimproved. Let it be accompanied with the trembling response 'Lord, what would you have me to do?' Seek to feel that God has thereby some great end in view; some wise meaning to subserve; some gracious lesson to teach. Inquire what it is. Depend upon it, your mind will never be in a more impressible state than now. Afflictions, like other voices, if unheeded, only harden and render callous.

Let the present be regarded as the most solemn messenger you ever can hear, proclaiming, 'Prepare to meet your God.' It may be now or never with you! Feel as if this bereavement were some gracious precursor sent to give you the timely warning, 'Be also ready!' The first 'pin taken from your earthly tabernacle!' Let it be as a warning angel telling you to strike your tent and pitch it nearer heaven; 'Arise and depart, for this is not your rest!' As we have seen the timid bird hopping from bough to bough until it reach the topmost branch, and then winging its flight to the sky; so with the soul-affliction is designed to drive it from bough to bough, from refuge to refuge, higher and still higher, until at last it soars upward to the Heaven of its God.

THE FIRST BEREAVEMENT. Is it not a befitting, the most befitting season to give yourself unreservedly to the service of God? Your hold is loosened from the world. Like a vessel driven from its moorings, you are drifting unpiloted on a tempestuous sea. Let these raging waters urge you to take shelter in the alone quiet haven. Oh! if at this season you are without God--a stranger to the power of religion; uncheered by its precious, gracious promises, I pity you from the bottom of my heart, I grieve for you!

In the wide world there is no sadder spectacle than the poor and unbefriended, the orphaned or widowed, or withered heart, ungladdened by one holy beam of Biblical consolation! The dark valley of the Shadow of Death traversed; and not one solitary ray falling from the Star of Bethlehem! Or equally mournful if the heart be unhumiliated; if it refuses to bear the rod; if the death chamber only re-echoes with guilty murmurings, and the chastened soul be unable to point to any 'peaceable fruit of righteousness,' as the result of the Divine dealings!

There is a depth of meaning in what a son of consolation has said, as he mingles exhortations with solaces- 'unsanctified trials become deep afflictions.' On the other hand, if you are no stranger to these exceeding great and precious promises, or if until now a stranger, you are ready to avail yourself of this one only solace in such an hour, what a hallowed experience yours is! With all the unutterable, untold depths of your sorrow, I know not a time fuller of more chastened joy than the mourning Christian's chamber, when the world is shut out, and he is alone with God!

The sun of his earthly prosperity set, and set it may be forever! but this only allowing the bright clustering constellations of Divine consolation to bedeck the dark firmament; the stars of Bible promises coming out one by one like ministering angels, and telling of bright scenes which 'eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor heart conceived!' As in a time of rain and cloud the distant hills look nearer, so do the everlasting hills of glory appear, in the cloudy and dark day, nearer, brighter, more glorious, sparkling with ten thousand rills of love and covenant faithfulness unseen and unobserved before!

If thus cheered, yours is indeed an enviable lot. The man in the glitter of worldly prosperity is not to be envied. But you are! You have got what the world with all its promises and blandishments can not give, and which the world with all its deceitfulness can not take away, the Eternal God Himself, who can fill all blanks, and compensate for all losses; who can make that solitary chamber where you are now mourning and weeping, a Patmos, bright as the lovely Aegean Isle was to John, with manifestations of a Savior's presence and love.

Remember that affliction has always been God's peculiar method of dealing with His own people. It is because He loves them He chastises them. 'I have chosen you,' says He, 'in the furnace of affliction.' 'What son is he whom the Father chastens not?' As an old writer says, 'He instructs His scholars in the school of the Law, and in the school of the Gospel, but He has a third class for advanced learners, and that is the school of Trial.' A sublime dialogue between a saint on earth and a saint in heaven, represents each member of the white-robed multitude as having graduated in this same school, 'Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?

These are those who have come out of great tribulation.' Seek to exercise simple faith in the wisdom of God's dealings, the unswerving rectitude of His dispensations. He does all well, and nothing but what is well. Nothing can come wrong to you that comes from His hand. Confide where you can not understand. Trust where you can not trace. Repress all guilty murmurings, check all rebellious thoughts, 'Get,' as a tried saint expresses it, 'your hows and whys' crucified, and resolve all into, and rest satisfied in, infinite wisdom tempered with covenant love; He may teach by contraries, but no one teaches like Him.'

Seek to magnify His name by the sweet exercise of the grace of patience. This is a grace peculiar to the saints on earth. Patience is unknown in heaven, where there are no trials to call it into exercise. Glorify God in the fires. Seek, afflicted one, to feel how light this heavy cross is, in comparison with what your sins deserved. Ay, and what a drop in the ocean of suffering it is, in comparison with what the Prince of sufferers underwent, whose solitary experience was this, 'ALL your waves and your billows have gone over me!'

He could make a challenge to a whole world of sufferers which to this hour remains unanswered, and ever will remain 'Was there ever any sorrow like unto MY sorrow?' Child of God! if such indeed you are, believe it, there is not one drop of wrath in the bitter cup you are now drinking. He took all that was bitter out of it, and left it a cup of love ! As this your first trial is a new and never to be forgotten epoch in your natural life,

let it be emphatically so in your spiritual.

Hear a voice in it saying, 'Arise and call upon your God.' The once well-beaten road to the place of prayer may have been allowed to be choked up, and covered with the rank weeds of worldliness and neglect. Let affliction prove as a sharp sickle, mowing them down, and once more opening a way to an unfrequented and deserted mercy-seat. Be it yours henceforth to arise above your trial, in the only way in which you would wish to rise above it; that is, to rise above the world and to live with God!

Let your walk be close and habitual with Him. Let your citizenship be in heaven. A little while and the night of weeping will be over, and a gentle hand in a tearless world will dry up the very source of tears. Oh let this 'blessed hope' reconcile you to the severest discipline of earth. Think often of heaven; and that though there be night (yes, seasons of deepest starless midnight) here, 'there is no night THERE.' No bereavement there either to be experienced or dreaded! Every day is bringing you nearer that home of joy! nearer reunion with those glorified, one of whom, it may be, you are now mourning; nearer Him who is now standing with the hoarded treasures of Eternity in His hand, and the hoarded love of Eternity in His heart!

How will one brief moment there, banish in everlasting oblivion all the pangs and sorrows of the valley of weeping! 'When you have passed,' says a holy man of God who is now realizing the truth of his own words, 'when you have passed to the other side of that narrow river, to the which we shall so shortly come, you will have no doubt that all you have undergone was little enough for the desired end.' 'Soon and forever, Such promise our trust, Though ashes to ashes, And dust unto dust.

Soon and forever; Our union shall be made perfect, our glorious Redeemer, in Thee! When the sins and the sorrows Of time shall be over, Its pangs and its partings Remembered no more, Where life can not fail, And where death can not sever, Christians with Christ shall be Soon and forever.' Meanwhile, return to life's duties with the spirit of 'a weaned child,' exhibiting meek acquiescence in the sovereign will of your God. Yes! return to life's duties! It is by no means the smallest part of your trial thus to go out to breathe the cheerless air of the world again, and mingle with a saddened and crushed spirit amid scenes where all is uncongenial.

But impossible as it may now seem, 'the waves of life,' to use the striking words of a writer already quoted, 'must and will settle back to their usual flow where that treasured bark has gone down. For how imperiously, how coolly, in disregard of all one's feeling, does the hard, cold, monotonous course of daily realities move on! Still must we eat and drink, and sleep and wake again--still bargain, buy, sell, ask and answer questions pursue in short, a thousand shadows, though all interest in them be over, the cold mechanical habit of living remaining, after all vital interest in it has fled.'

But 'as your day, so shall your strength be.' You know not until you make trial of it all the blessed fullness and truthfulness of this precious promise. 'You are about,' says one deeply experienced, 'to enter into realities of consolation you have never imagined to be in God.' You have heard ten thousand broken hearts tell what their experience has been. 'We have been wonderfully supported.' And what was the secret of it? Let a much-tried Apostle answer: 'All men forsook me.'

Notwithstanding, the Lord stood by me and strengthened me!' He proportions grace to trial. Your extremity is His opportunity. 'We went through the flood on foot,' says the Psalmist; 'there did we rejoice in Him.' Beautiful picture of every saint! or rather, glorious testimony to the sustaining grace of God; a firm footing amid the threatening waves! 'There!' (when the billows were around us; in the very midst of our affliction),

'there did we rejoice in Him!' He will deal tenderly, wisely, lovingly, with you.

God our Maker 'gives songs in the night.' 'Whatever our need be, He is below it; underneath are the everlasting arms!' There is no Bible figure on which the Christian mourner dwells with such delight as that of the Refiner of silver, sitting by the furnace of His own lighting, tempering its heat; regulating the fury of the flames; quenching the violence of the fires; designing all, ALL not to consume and destroy, but to purify, brighten, refine! I commend you to God and to the word of His grace.

I commend you above all to the tenderness of that human sympathy which exists alone in Jesus. Angels and archangels, never having had sorrow, cannot sympathize. The glorious Being before whom they cast their crowns can! for sorrow tracked His footsteps, from the manger to the grave. We never can understand the depth and preciousness of His sympathy until we come to need it. 'I have had a deep, a very deep wound,' says Lady Powerscourt, 'the trial has been very severe, but how should I have known Him as a brother born for adversity without it?'

He has gone through every class in our wilderness-school, He seems intent to fill up every gap love has been forced to make. One of His errands from heaven was, to 'bind up the broken-hearted.' Let your trial only endear Him to you more and more, Hear as it were, the voice of the departed, stealing down from the heights of glory, and thus, as Boaz said to Ruth, gently rebuking your fast-falling tears, 'It is true that I am your near kinsman, howbeit there is a Kinsman nearer than I!' (Ruth 3:12.)

Though earthly ties have been severing, He still 'lives and loves.' 'She was,' said good old Philip Henry, when writing of Lady Puleston, who died in 1658, 'She was the best friend I had on earth, but my Friend in heaven is still where He was, and He will never leave me nor forsake me.' Go forward to a dark future, fearlessly relying on His 'exceeding great and precious promises.' The future is not yours but His; He is a rich provider and a wise provider. Take as your wilderness-watchword, 'I shall not lack.'

He will 'guide you (no, He is guiding you) by His counsel, 'and afterward' 'AFTERWARD!' it is not for you or me to scan that word! It may be one of painful significance; it may be after much discipline, it may be after a rough and rugged and thorny road; it may be after trial upon trial, and wave upon wave. But even on the darkest and dreariest view of the future, though this your trial should prove but the commencement of a lengthened 'Valley of Baca' (weeping) one continuous path of sadness, remember what follows that 'afterward He will receive you into Glory!'

Soon the last ripple of sorrow will be heard murmuring on the other side of Jordan, and then every vestige of its sound will die away, and that forever! Entering the triumphal arch of Heaven, you will read in living characters the history of a sinless, sorrowless future: 'And God shall wipe away all tears from their eye; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.' Rev. 21:4.

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