

The Sorrows of the Bereaved Spread Before Jesus

by Jonathan Edwards

When a faithful and eminent minister is taken away by death, those who are bereaved should go and spread their sorrows before Jesus, the Supreme Head of the church, and Bishop of souls.

Scripture: Proverbs 18:24, Isaiah 63:9, Matthew 15:32, Luke 7:13, John 11:33, John 14:18, Ephesians 4:8, Philippians 4:19, Hebrews 4:15, Revelation 21:4

Topics: "Grief And Comfort", "Christ's Compassion"

Description

Jonathan Edwards preaches about the importance of spreading sorrows before Jesus when faced with the death of an eminent minister in the work of the gospel ministry. Using the account of John the Baptist's disciples as an example, he emphasizes the disciples' actions of burying John's body with respect and then going to tell Jesus of their sorrow. Edwards highlights the compassion, pity, and all-sufficiency of Christ in comforting the bereaved, pointing to Jesus as the ultimate source of wisdom, guidance, and support in times of loss and affliction.

Transcript

The Sorrows Of The Bereaved Spread Before Jesus

Preached at Hatfield, MA. September 2, 1741, being the day of interment of the Rev. William Williams.

Matthew 14:12

And his disciples came and took up the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus.

Subject: When anyone is taken away by death that has been eminent in the work of the gospel ministry, 'tis suitable that such as are bereaved thereby should go and spread their sorrows before Jesus.

Concerning these words I would observe three things.

I. On what occasion that was, that we have an account of in the text. It was on occasion of the death of John the Baptist, who was a person whose business it had been to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God. He was a minister of Jesus Christ, and had been improved to do great service, was an instrument of much good to many in Judea and Jerusalem, in his lifetime. He was cruelly murdered by Herod, at the

instigation of Herodias, having exposed himself to her malice by faithfully reproving them for their incestuous wickedness.

II. We may observe who the persons were spoken of in the text. They were those that had been the disciples of John the Baptist, that had sat at his feet to hear him preach the gospel, that were his constant followers, that were with him as those that received great benefit by his ministry, and were as it were his children.

III. We may observe their behavior on this occasion, consisting in two things.

First, that whereby they showed their regard to the remains of the deceased, They took up the body and buried it. It had been used in a barbarous manner, by others, that had also been his hearers, and were under special obligations to have treated him with honor. They cruelly murdered him, by severing his head from his body; and his head was carried in a charger to Herodias, that she, instead of paying that respect that was due to the remains of so venerable a person, might have her malice and cruelty gratified by such a spectacle, and that she might thence take occasion to insult the dead. While that part of the dead body was thus used by Herodias, his disciples, out of respect and honor to their master and teacher, decently interred the rest.

Second, that which they did, consequent on this, for God's glory and their own good, They went and told Jesus. Him they knew to be one that their master John, while he lived, had testified a great regard to. Jesus was he whose forerunner John was; whom he had preached, and of whom he had said, "Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world:" And, "This is he, of whom I said, After me cometh one that is preferred before me;" and whom he saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God. And probably they knew that Christ was one that had put great honor upon John their teacher in his lifetime. For he, though he was the Son of God, and John's Maker and Savior, yet came to him to be baptized of him, and had said of him, that "Among those that were born of women, there had not risen a greater than John the Baptist."

It was now a sorrowful time with John's disciples; when they were thus bereaved of him whose teachings they had sat under. And the manner of his death was doubtless very grievous to them. They were like a company of sorrowful, distressed, bereaved children. And what do they do in their sorrows, but go to Jesus with their complaint. The first thing that they do, after paying proper regards to the remains of their dear master, is to go to Christ, to spread their case before him, seeking comfort and help from him. Thus they sought their own benefit.

And probably one end of their immediately going and telling Jesus was, that he, being informed of it, might conduct himself accordingly, as his wisdom should direct, for the interest of his own kingdom. When so great a person as John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, was thus martyred, it was a great event, in which the common cause, in which both Christ and he were engaged, was greatly concerned. It was therefore fit that he that was at the head of the whole affair should be informed of it, for his future conduct in the affairs of his kingdom. And accordingly we find that Jesus seems immediately to be influenced in his conduct by these tidings; as you may see in the next verse. "When Jesus heard of it, he departed thence by a ship into a desert place apart." Thus John's disciples sought God's glory.

The observation from the words that I would make the subject of my discourse at this times, is this:

When anyone is taken away by death, that has been eminent in the work of the gospel ministry, such as are thereby bereaved, should go and spread their calamity before Jesus.

Though in handling this subject I might particularly speak to several propositions that are contained in this observation, and many things might profitably be insisted on under it, if there were room for it within the compass of a sermon; yet I shall only give the reasons of the doctrine, and then hasten to the application.

The following reasons may be given why, in case of such an awful dispensation of Providence, those that are concerned in it, and bereaved by it, should go and spread their sorrow before Jesus:

1. Christ is one that is ready to pity the afflicted. It is natural for persons that are bereaved of any that are dear to them, and for all under deep sorrow, to seek some that they may declare and lay open their griefs to, that they have good reason to think will pity them, and have a fellow-feeling with them of their distress. The heart that is full of grief wants vent, and desires to pour out its complaint; but it seeks a compassionate friend to pour it out before.

Christ is such an one, above all others. He of old, before his incarnation, manifested himself full of compassion towards his people. For that is Jesus that is spoken of [in] Isa. 63:9, "In all their affliction he was afflicted; and the angel of his presence saved them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old." And when he was upon earth in his state of humiliation, he was the most wonderful instance of a tender, pitiful, compassionate spirit, that ever appeared in the world. How often are we told of his having compassion on one and another! So Mat. 15:32, "Then Jesus called his disciples, and said unto them, I have compassion on the multitude." So he had compassion on the man possessed with devils. Mark 5:19, "Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done to thee, and hath had compassion on thee." So we read of his pitying the mother, that was bereaved of her son. Luke 7:13. There we have an account, when Christ went into the city of Nain, and met the people carrying out a dead man, the only son of his mother, that was a widow, that when he saw her, he had compassion on her. So when the two blind men that sat by the wayside cried to Jesus, as he passed by, saying, "Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou Son of David," we read that Jesus had compassion on them. Mat. 20:30. So we read of his being moved with compassion. Mat. 14:14, "And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and when he saw them he was moved with compassion." His speeches to his disciples were full of compassion; especially those that he uttered a little before his death, of which we have an account in the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 16th chapters of John. His miracles were almost universally deeds of pity to persons under affliction.

And seeing such a pitiful heart appeared in him on all occasions, no wonder that John's disciples, when bereaved to their dear guide and teacher, and their hearts were full of sorrow, came to him for pity. Which likewise induced Mary and Martha to come and fall down, pouring out their tears at Jesus' feet, when their dear brother Lazarus was dead. Other Jews came to comfort them, before Jesus came, whom they little regarded, but when they heard that Jesus was come, they soon go and spread their sorrows before him. They were assured that he would pity them; and their expectation was not frustrated; for he was most tenderly affected and moved at their tears. We are told that on that occasion he groaned in spirit and was troubled. John 11:33. And when he came to the grave, it is observed, and a special note seems to be set upon it, that he wept, verse 35.

He was one that wept with those that wept. And indeed it was mere pity that brought him into the world, and induced him not only to shed tears but to shed his blood. He poured out his blood as water on the

earth, out of compassion to the poor, miserable children of men. And when do we ever read of any one person coming to him when on earth, with a heavy heart, or under any kind of sorrow or distress for pity or help, but what met with a kind and compassionate reception?

And he has the same compassion now he is ascended into glory. There is still the same encouragement for the bereaved ones to go and spread their sorrows before him.

Afflicted persons love to speak of their sorrows to them that have had EXPERIENCE of affliction, and know what sorrow is. But there is none on earth or in heaven that ever had so much experience of sorrow as Christ. Therefore he knows how to pity the sorrowful, and especially may we be confident that he is ready to pity those that are bereaved of a faithful MINISTER, because such a bereavement is a calamity that concerns the souls of men; and Christ hath especially shown his pity to men's souls. For it was chiefly for them that he died, to relieve the miseries of the soul especially, is it that he hath provided. And it was from pity to the souls of men that he made that provision for them that he hath done, in appointing such an order of men as GOSPEL MINISTERS, and in sending them forth to preach the gospel. It was because he had compassion on men's souls, that he hath appointed ministers to watch for souls.

2. Christ has purchased all that persons need under such a bereavement. He has purchased all that miserable men stand in need of under all their calamities, and comfort under every sort of affliction. And therefore that his invitation to those that "Labour and are heavy laden," with either natural or moral evil: he has purchased divine cordials and supports for those hearts that are ready to sink: he has purchased all needed comfort and help for the widow and the fatherless: he has purchased a sanctified improvement and fruit of affliction, for all such as come to him, and spread their sorrows before him. He has purchased those things that are sufficient to make up their loss, that are bereaved of a great blessing in an eminent minister of the gospel. It is he that has purchased those divine blessings, those influences and fruits of the Spirit of God, that the work of the ministry is appointed to be the means of. Faithful ministers themselves are the fruits of his purchase; and he has purchased all those gifts and graces whereby ministers do become faithful, eminent, and successful. And therefore when he "ascended up on high, he received such gifts for men." Eph. 4:8, etc. -- So that he has purchased all that is needed to make up for the loss that is sustained by the death of an eminent minister.

3. Christ is able to afford all that help that is needed in such a case. His power and his wisdom are as sufficient as his purpose, and answerable to his compassions. By the bowels of his mercies, the love and tenderness of his heart, he is disposed to help those that are in affliction; and his ability is answerable to his disposition. He is able to support the heart under the heaviest sorrows, and to give light in the darkness. He can divide the thickest cloud with beams of heavenly light and comfort. He is one that gives songs in the night, and turns the shadow of death into the morning. He has power to make up the loss of those that are bereaved by the death of the most eminent minister. His own presence with the bereaved is sufficient. If the great Shepherd and Bishop of souls be present, how much more is this than enough to supply the want of any under shepherd! And then he is able to furnish others with like gifts and graces for that work .

Persons under sorrowful bereavements are ready to go and lay open their sorrows to them that they think will be ready to pity them, though they know they can but pity them, and cannot help them. How much more is here in such a case to induce us to go to Jesus, who is not only so ready to pity, but so able to help, able abundantly more than to fill up the breach, and able to turn all our sorrows into joy!

4. The consideration of the special office of Christ, and the work that he has undertaken for his people, should engage them to go and spread such a calamity, as the bereavement of a faithful and eminent minister, before him. For he is the Head of the body, the great Shepherd of the sheep, and Lord of the harvest; that has undertaken the care of the whole church, and has the absolute government of it in his hands, and the supreme disposal and management of all ecclesiastical affairs; to whom belongs the care of the universal church, and every part of it, with respect to its supply with such guides, officers, and ordinances, as it stands in need of. In case of bereavement of an eminent minister, it was he that sent forth such a minister, appointed him his charge, and furnished him for his work, continued and assisted him in it, and in his own time removed him. And it is he that, in such a case, by his office, has the care of filling up the vacancy, and furnishing, establishing, and assisting successors, and supplying all the wants of bereaved churches. It is surely therefore suitable and natural to go to him in such a case, and spread such a calamity before him.

APPLICATION

I come now to apply what has been said to the SORROWFUL OCCASION of our being thus assembled at this time, even the death of that aged SERVANT of God, who has long been eminent in the work of the gospel ministry in this place.

There are many that may well look on themselves as nearly concerned in this awful providence, and sharers in the bereavement; all of whom should be directed by this doctrine, to go and spread their affliction before Jesus, that compassionate, all-sufficient Head of the church, and Savior of the body, that merciful and faithful High Priest, that knows how to pity the afflicted.

And particularly it now becomes and concerns you, that belong to this church and congregation, that are bereaved of your aged and eminent PASTOR and FATHER, that has so long been a great blessing to you, now to go and tell JESUS.

The disciples of John, spoken of in the text, were those that were ordinarily under his instruction, and were his constant hearers, as it has been with you with respect to your aged PASTOR, that is now taken from you. Therefore be exhorted to do as they did. Do not think that you have finished your duty, when you have taken up his body and buried it, and have shown respect to his memory and remains at his funeral. This is the least part of your duty. That which mainly concerns you under this awful providence, is between Christ and your own souls.

God has now taken away from you an able and faithful minister of the New Testament, one that had long been a FATHER to you, and a FATHER in our Israel, a person of uncommon natural abilities and distinguished learning, a great divine, of very comprehensive knowledge, and of a solid, accurate judgment. -- Judiciousness and wisdom were eminently his character. He was one of eminent gifts, qualifying him for all parts of the work of the ministry; and there appeared a savor of holiness in his exercise of those gifts in public and private: so that he improved them as a servant of Christ, and a man of God. He was not negligent of the talents which his Lord had committed to him. You need not be told with what constant diligence he improved them, how studious at home, and how laborious in his public work. He ever devoted himself to the work to which he is called. The ministry which he had received of the Lord, he took heed to fulfill and pursued it with a constant and steadfast, even mind, through all its difficulties.

You know his manner of addressing heaven in his public prayers with you and for you, with what sanctity, humility, faith, and fervency, he seemed to apply himself to the FATHER of lights, from time to time, when

he stood in this desk as your mouth to God, and interceding for you, pleading with God through the grace and merits of a glorious MEDIATOR. And you know his manner of applying himself to you, when he came to you, from time to time, in the name of the Lord.

In his PUBLIC ministry, he mainly insisted on the most weighty and important things of religion. He was eminently an evangelical preacher; evangelical subjects seemed to be his delight. CHRIST was the subject of his preaching; and he much insisted on those things that did nearly concern the essence and power of religion; and had a peculiar faculty of judiciously and clearly handling the doctrines he insisted on, and treating properly whatever subject he took in hand; and of selecting the most weighty arguments and motives to enforce and set home those things that concern Christian experience and practice. His subjects were always weighty, and his manner of treating them peculiarly happy, showing the strength and accuracy of his judgment, and ever breathing for the SPIRIT OF PIETY, and a deep sense of the things he delivered, on his heart. His sermons were none of them mean, but were all solid, wise compositions. His words were none of them vain, but all were weighty.

And you need not be told with what weight the welfare of your souls seemed to lie on his heart, and how he instructed, and reproved, and warned, and exhorted you, with all authority, and with a fatherly tender concern for your eternal good. And with what wisdom he presided in the house of God, and guided its affairs; and also counseled and directed you in private, under your particular soul exercises and difficulties. You know how he has brought you up (for most of you have been trained up from your childhood under his ministry), with what authority, and with what judgment, prudence, and steadiness, he has conducted you, as well as meekness and gentleness. You know his manner of going in and out among you, how exemplary his walk and conversation has been, with what gravity, judgment, and savor of holiness, he has walked before you, as a man of God.

You have enjoyed great advantages for your souls' good, under his ministry. That you had such a minister was your privilege and your honor. He has been an ornament to the town of Hatfield. And his presence and conversation amongst you has been both profitable and pleasant; for though it was such as did peculiarly command AWE and RESPECT, yet it was, at the same time, HUMBLE and CONDESCENDING. It tended both to instruct and entertain those that he conversed with. As a wise man, and endued with knowledge, he showed out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom

But now it hath pleased a holy God to take him away from you. You will see his face and hear his voice no more in the land of the living. You will no more have the comfort and benefits of his presence with you, and the exercise of his ministry among you.

Therefore now go to Jesus, the Supreme Head of the church, and Bishop of souls. Your pastor is dead, and will not live again till the last day. But Christ, the chief Shepherd, though he was dead, is now alive! And behold, he lives forevermore. He ever lives to provide for his church, and to guide and feed his flock. Go to that Jesus whom your deceased pastor preached, and to whom he earnestly invited you while he lived, and give thanks for the many blessings you enjoyed in him. Remember how you have received and heard, and hold fast, that no man take your crown: *1* and go and humble yourselves also before him, that you made no better improvement of the ministry of your pastor while he lived. And beg of him a sanctified improvement of his awful hand in taking him away, and that he would help you to remember his warnings and counsels that you too much slighted whilst you had them, lest those warnings and counsels cry against you, and rise up in judgment against you another day, lest you see your pastor, that so affectionately, and earnestly, and so often, and for so long a time, continued to exhort you, and earnestly

prayed for you, while he lived, rising up in judgment, and bearing testimony against you, declaring how constantly and laboriously he entreated and called upon you, and how obstinately some of you slighted his counsels; and lest you see him sitting with Christ to judge and condemn you, and adoring his awful justice on your aggravated punishment.

All you that have an interest in JESUS, now go to him on this occasion, and tell him of your bereavement, and beg of him that he would not depart from you; but that he would make up his loss in his own immediate presence. Go to him for your surviving pastor, that he would be with him, and furnish him more and more for, and assist him in, that great work that is now wholly devolved upon him and make him also a burning and shining light amongst you; and that you may have of the presence and blessing of JESUS with you, and him.

And now, since I am called to speak in the name of Christ on this solemn occasion, I would apply myself to the near relations of the deceased, who are especially to be looked upon as the bereaved.

God in his holy providence has taken from you one that has been a great blessing, comfort, and honor to you, and deservedly very dear to you, and honored of you. The doctrine we are upon directs you what to do in your present circumstances, viz. to go to JESUS, to go and spread your affliction before an all-sufficient Redeemer.

And particularly I would apply myself to the honored relict, who stood in the nearest relation of any to the deceased, whom God by this awful providence has made a sorrowful widow. Suffer me, honored madam, in your great affliction, to exhibit to you a compassionate Redeemer. God has now taken from you that servant of his, that was the nearest and best friend you had in this world, that was your wise and prudent guide, your affectionate and pleasant companion, who was so great a blessing while he lived, to you and your family, and, under Christ, was so much the comfort and support of your life. You see, madam, where your resort must be. Your earthly friends can condole your loss, but cannot make it up to you. We must all confess ourselves to be but miserable comforters. But you may go and tell Jesus, and there you may have both support and reparation. His love and his presence is far beyond that of the nearest and most affectionate earthly friend. Now you are bereaved of your earthly consort, you may go to a spiritual husband, and seek his compassion and his company. He is the fountain of all that wisdom and prudence, that piety, that tender affection and faithful care, that you enjoyed in your departed consort. In him is an infinite fountain of all these things, and of all good. In him you may have light in your darkness, comfort in your sorrow, and fullness of joy and glory in another world, in an everlasting union with your dear, deceased relative, in the glorious presence of the same Redeemer, in whose presence is fullness of joy, and at whose right hand are pleasures forevermore.

This doctrine also directs the bereaved, afflicted children, that are, with hearts full of grief, now mourning over a dear departed father, where to go and what to do. You will no longer have your father's wisdom to guide you, his tender love to comfort and delight you, and his affectionate care to guard and assist you, and his pious and judicious counsels to direct you, and his holy examples set before you, and his fervent, humble, believing prayers with you and for you.

But in the blessed Jesus, your father's Lord and Redeemer, you may have much more than all those things. Your father's virtues that made him so great a blessing to you, were but the image of what is in Christ.

Therefore go to him in your mourning; go and tell Jesus; tell a compassionate Savior what has befallen you. Heretofore you have had an earthly father to go to, whose heart was full of tenderness to you. But the heart of his Redeemer is much more tender; his wisdom and his love is infinitely beyond that of any earthly parent. Go to him, and then you will surely find comfort. Go to him, and you will find that, though you are bereaved, yet you are not left in any want. You will find that all your wants are supplied, and all your loss made up, and much more than so.

But here I would particularly, in humility, address myself to my honored fathers, the sons of the deceased, that are improved in the same great work of the gospel ministry, or in other public business for the service of their generation. Honored sirs, though it might be more proper for me to come to you for instruction and counsel, than to take it upon me to exhort you, yet as I am one that ought to have a fellow-feeling of your affliction, and to look on myself as a sharer in it, and as you have desired me to speak in the name of Christ, on this occasion, suffer me to mention to you that source of comfort, that infinite fountain of good, one of the larger streams of which has failed by the death of an earthly father, even the blessed Jesus. You will doubtless acknowledge it as an instance of his great goodness to you, that you have been the sons of such a father; being sensible that your reputation and serviceableness in your generation, have been, under Christ, very much owing to the great advantages you have been under, by his instructions, counsels, and education. And is it not fit that children that have learned of such a faithful servant of Christ, and been brought up at his feet, now he is dead, should do as John the Baptist's disciples did, go and tell Jesus? From whom you may receive comfort under your bereavement, and from whom you may receive more of that Spirit that dwelt in him, and greater degrees of those virtues he derived from Christ, to cause you to shine brighter, and to make you still greater blessings in your generation. Now death has veiled and hid from sight a star that shone with reflected light, our text and doctrine leads you to the Sun, that hath light in himself, and shines with infinite, unfailling brightness. And while you go to Jesus, honored sirs, on this occasion for yourselves, I humbly desire your requests to him for us the surviving ministers of this county, that he would be with us, now he has taken from us him that was a father amongst us.

I next would address myself to the surviving pastor of this church. We may well look upon you, reverend sir, as one in an especial manner concerned in this awful providence, and that has a large share in the bereavement. You doubtless are sensible what reason you have to bless God for the advantage you have had, in serving in the gospel of Christ, so long as you have done, with the venerable person deceased, as a son with a father, enjoying the benefit of his instructions, counsels, and example. And particularly, you will often recollect the affectionate and fatherly counsels he gave you, to diligence and faithfulness in your Lord's work, with encouragement of his protection and assistance to carry you through all difficulties, the last evening of his life. And now, dear sir, God has taken him from you, as he took Elijah from Elisha, and as he took John the Baptist, the New Testament Elijah, from his disciples. Therefore now you are directed what to do, viz. go and tell Jesus; as those disciples did. You have now a great work devolved upon you. You have him no more, who, while he lived, was as a father to you, to guide and assist you, and take the burthen of your great work from you. Therefore you have nowhere else to go, but to your great Lord and Master, that has sent you to labor in that part of his vineyard, where his aged, and now departed, servant was employed, to seek strength and wisdom, and divine influence and assistance from him, and a double portion of that Spirit that dwelt in your predecessor.

And lastly, The text I am upon may be of direction to us the surviving ministers of this county, what to do on this sorrowful occasion. God has now taken our father and master from our head. He has removed him that has heretofore, under Christ, been very much our strength, that we have been wont to resort to it in

difficult cases for instruction and direction, and that used to be amongst us from time to time, in our associations, and that we were wont to behold as the head and ornament of those conventions. *2* Where else can we now go but to Jesus, the ever living Head of the whole church, and Lord of the whole harvest, the Fountain of light, our great Lord and Master, that sends all gospel ministers, and on whom they universally depend? Let this awful providence bring us to look to Christ, to seek more of his presence with us; and that HE would preside as head in our associations. Let it bring us to a more immediate and entire dependence upon him, for instruction and direction, in all our difficulties.

Let us on this occasion consider what God has done in this county of late years. It was not many years ago that the county was filled with aged ministers, that were our fathers. But our fathers, where are they? What a great alteration is made in a little time, in the churches in this part of the land! *3* How frequent of late have been the warnings of this kind that God has given us to prepare to give up our account! Let us go to Jesus, and seek grace of him that we may be faithful while we live, and that he would assist us in our great work, that when we also are called hence, we may give up our account with joy and not with grief, and that hereafter we may meet those our fathers, that have gone before us in the faithful labors of the gospel, and that we may shine forth with them, as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars forever and ever.

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