



If, like many others at this time of year, you've been traipsing around the shops and malls in pursuit of that perfect gift for someone, chances are you will have heard Andy Williams' 'It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year' blasting out over the speakers. 'Festive' songs, magazines and advertisements invariably present an image of smiling, happy people, all enjoying fun, food, fashion and parties. In reality, though, this isn't the universal experience. Christmas can bring financial and relational pressures. And Christmas can heighten feelings of loneliness and loss. As I write this, I am thinking especially of the families of two young women whose lives were claimed by cancer within just a fortnight of each other this summer past. Both were married mothers with young children. This world is sometimes called a 'vale of tears' and in these families, as with many others, tears will flow this Christmastime. It is such a comfort to know that not one tear falls unnoticed by our Heavenly Father. Scripture has much to say on the subject of tears and crying, and in this editorial I would like to see what we may learn by considering just a few of the Bible's many references.

1. Have you cried over LOSS? Whilst travelling out to East Belfast by bus one afternoon, it was impossible not to overhear a young woman seated opposite me, sobbing inconsolably as she spoke to a friend on her mobile phone, relating how she had just been 'dumped' by a man she obviously still loved and cared deeply for. Love and loss is an unavoidable part of life, be it the break-up of a relationship, the loss or death of a pet, or the most heart-rending of all losses – when we must bid an earthly farewell to one much loved and cherished, who will be sorely missed. When a Christian treads the vale of death's shadow, they will not do so alone, neither will the Lord leave us to sorrow alone. I love the words that Martha spoke to Mary after Lazarus' death: 'The Master is come, and calleth for thee.' (Jn 11:28) And, though it is the shortest verse in the Bible, those two words, 'Jesus wept', (Jn 11:35) say so much. 'In every pain that rends the heart, the Man of Sorrows has a part.' The One who took on flesh and blood truly is 'touched with the feeling of our infirmities.' (Heb 4:15) He Who has walked in our shoes knows exactly how we feel, and He has promised us: 'I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.' (Jn 14:18)

2. Have you cried over LACK? Much of our lives are spent waiting for one thing or another – passing exams, securing jobs / promotions / financial security / finding marital happiness – the list could just go on and on. Getting these things can often prove a struggle, the wait can feel endless, and we can bemoan our lack to all and sundry – yet actually fail to cry to the One Whose intervention and omnipotence really *can* make the difference. Ponder the words of the Apostle James: '... Ye have not, because ye ask not.' (James 4:2) Sometimes we struggle to know what to do for the best, but consider James' words just three chapters earlier: 'If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be

given him.’ (James 1:5) If we will avail of the wisdom that comes from above (James 3:17), what a difference that can make. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus instructed us to ask, seek and knock (Matt 7:7). As these verbs are in the continuous tense, the literal meaning is to *keep on asking, seeking and knocking*. Are you struggling with lack today? Help is at hand. ‘I cried unto the LORD with my voice; with my voice unto the LORD did I make my supplication. I poured out my complaint before him; I showed before him my trouble. When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then thou knewest my path ...’ (Ps 142:1-3)

3. Have you cried over LUKEWARMNESS and LETHARGY? In the busyness of life it is all too possible for our fervency in the faith to wane. We have plenty of degrees in the church today – but too little temperature. Yet, as J. C. Ryle once noted: ‘Nothing is so offensive to Christ as lukewarmness in religion.’ This is an observation borne out by the words of the Lord Jesus to the church in Laodicea: ‘I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.’ (Rev 3:15-16) In the light of the challenge of these verses, do we need to stop and take a look at our own commitment to Christ’s cause? In the Shepherd’s Psalm we read David’s famous words: ‘He restoreth my soul.’ (Ps 23:3) What He did back then He still does today. C. H. Spurgeon has written: ‘There is no better cure for lukewarmness than a good supper with Christ.’ Do you need to cry to Him today – to be refreshed, restored, rekindled and reinvigorated?

4. Have you cried to God over our LAND? In the lengthy Psalm 119 (whose theme is God’s word) David penned these heartfelt words: ‘It is time for thee, LORD, to work: for they have made void thy law ... Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.’ In a climate where the Bible’s timeless wisdom is increasingly ignored by today’s legislators, we could echo David’s words, but are we concerned enough to cry out to God for our land? In his epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul said: ‘Brethren, my heart’s desire, and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved.’ (Rom 10:1) As we consider this island of Ireland, and our wider United Kingdom, do we care enough to cry unto God that He might move us, and use us, to see many of our fellow citizens become citizens of heaven also – through the new birth?

5. Have you cried to God over the LOST? One Sunday morning many years ago our then minister announced his subject for the evening service would be ‘The Christian’s Great Eye Disease’. Keith Green, in his 1978 song ‘Asleep in the Light’, imagined God’s feelings on this very same theme: ‘Bless me Lord, bless me Lord / You know it’s all I ever hear / No one aches, no one hurts / No one even sheds one tear.’ Keith’s theme – and our minister’s theme – was tearlessness and unconcern over lost souls. Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet, and I never fail to be challenged by these words of his: ‘Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!’ (Jer 9:1). Luke 19:41 records how, when Jesus came near and beheld the city of Jerusalem, He wept over it. Speaking to the church elders of Ephesus, Paul challenged them: ‘that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.’ (Acts 20:31) ‘Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning.’ (Rom 15:4) What moved the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul to weep, pray and labour? Was it not a

keen realisation of eternal realities – of a heaven to gain, a hell to shun, and a God who is mighty and willing to save (Is 63:1)? I recall a speaker at a lunchtime CSCU meeting in Clarence Court once saying: ‘My great concern is my unconcern.’ I can relate to that. But, to any who will ask Him, God will give them a burden and a passion for souls. And He has promised to bless and reward their labours. ‘They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.’ (Ps 126:5-6)

Tears have long been a part of human experience. The sixth psalm, penned by David over 3,000 years ago, contains these words: ‘I am weary with my groaning; all the night (*every night*) make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears.’ (Ps 6:6) In our valley experiences, where tears may freely flow, how comforting to remember that God bottles our tears (Ps 56:8). This is, of course, figurative language, but the lesson is clear – we don’t shed a single tear without God knowing and caring. Yet a day is coming when the child of God will no longer shed tears. ‘Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.’ (Ps 30:5) When that eternal morning dawns ‘... God shall wipe away *all tears* from their eyes; 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) What a day that shall be! Dear reader, will you be there? Are you ready? Have you trusted the One who is the Door? (Jn 10:9) If not, why not make the Christ of Christmas *your* Saviour this very day?