

THE SEED OF JOY IN THE SOIL OF SORROW
Psalm 126:5-6

This past week, I conducted a funeral. I watched as an 8 year old girl, stood at the casket where her 49 year old father lay. I watched this little girl's tears fall and soak into the suit lapel of her daddy, who was now gone. As the family exited, I watched the funeral directors close the casket and seal it – never to be opened again. I wondered, would those tears water any seeds of joy that one day might spring up as she remembers the love her daddy had for her? Would those tears see her daddy, who professed faith in Christ, one day resurrected to everlasting life, on the Day of Resurrection when Jesus Christ returns? If she shares that faith in Christ, will she see him again? The seeds of joy sometimes grow so painfully slow. Sometimes for a long time, all we can see is the soil of sorrow.

There is no immunity to sorrow in this world for any of us. God's people have always suffered and gone through times of sorrow. Some of that sorrow comes from being persecuted for our faith, but much of our sorrow comes from things that happen to anyone else – the death of a loved one, illness, tragedy, loss, life circumstances, bad decisions, sin. Life happens, and if you live long enough, you will go through many times of sorrow in your life. Christians are not immune to hardship and sorrow. Jesus doesn't create some protective bubble around us that prevents tragedy from entering in. The real question is: how do we respond to those times of sorrow? What happens to our faith in God in the midst of suffering, pain and sadness?

Since the beginning, God's people have never been immune from suffering. If you want to know about suffering, talk to the Jews. One of the greatest times of Israel's sorrow was when Judea and Jerusalem were completely destroyed by their enemies, the Babylonians. The Temple of God lay in ruins in a heap of rubble. Those who survived the attack were carried off to the foreign land of Babylon as slaves. So many of the sad and sorrowful Psalms reflect the feelings of loss and despair God's people had as they found themselves plucked from their homeland and estranged from God.

Psalm 137:1-4 describes some of the sorrow: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?" They lived in the land of sorrows. What is it like to live in the land of sorrows? You can be buried by it or you can plant in hope the seeds of joy to come.

The prophet Jeremiah was given the difficult job of announcing God's judgment on Judea because of their faithlessness toward God. He warned and warned again that the Babylonians were coming and there was nothing they could do to stop them, so just lay down your arms and try to avoid as much bloodshed as possible. Jeremiah suffered for being faithful to God and proclaiming this message. But the people would not repent. They called on God to deliver them anyway. And the destruction and loss of life was immense. Jeremiah was called the weeping prophet, because he wept over the fate of his people.

Yet, in the midst of wallowing in the soil of his sorrow, in hope Jeremiah planted a seed of future joy. As the Babylonian army was gathering, Jeremiah purchased a plot of land. (He probably got it fairly cheap.) It was a seed planted in hope that his people would one day return to Jerusalem and rebuild it again. Seventy years later, according to prophecy, they were finally allowed to return. The people were singing songs of joy as they crested the hill that overlooked Jerusalem. Then when they saw the holy city in ruins, overgrown with brush, inhabited by wild animals, they wept.

And in hope they tilled the soil of their sorrow and planted seeds of joy. They planted their crops. And when the harvest time came, they sang songs of joy. Joy had burst forth.

**¹ When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion,
we were like men who dreamed.**

**² Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.
Then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."**

**³ The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.**

**⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negev.**

**⁵ Those who sow in tears
will reap with songs of joy.**

**⁶ He who goes out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with him. Psalm 126**

The Path Mission Project, during Lent, has been to take a potted flower plant home, that was still just emerging from the soil. As we watched the plant grow, we are reminded of how the seed or bulb of Easter, was planted in the dark soil of Lent – how the seed of joy springs forth from the soil of sorrow. How many of you have flowering plants already? Rhonda and I had ours inside. She had repotted it, and it was growing – in fact the blossoms were already coming out. I remember one day walking in, and I asked her if she had bought some new floral air freshener, but she hadn't. It was the fragrance of the flower filling the room. (Our hope is that it will last until Easter when we bring it to church and deliver it to one of our home bound members.)

It made me think, "What changes have happened in our lives from the time we first received that plant without any flower and just the smell of dirt, to now, when the blooms emerged and filled the room with fragrance?" Off the top of my head I thought of how,

when we first got the plant, one of my sons was out of work and having financial problems where he was falling behind in his bills, and he also had legal problems due to the behavior of his dogs. I talked to him the other night, and now, since the flower bloomed, he was working steady; he is receiving a healthy tax refund; and the legal issues about his dogs have been resolved. What seeds of joy have begun to bloom since you first got your plant?

Now, I know every situation doesn't always turn out good. But when we live in faith and trust and God, we begin to see more and more of them. I remember hearing a story about two friends who were discussing their favorite parts of the Bible. One said, "My favorite phrase is 5 words repeated over and over in the Bible." His friend couldn't figure out what that was, so he asked, "What phrase is that?" And the other replied, "The phrase, 'And it came to pass...' Whenever someone in the Bible was in a difficult situation, the words pop us, 'and it came to pass.' Then God helps them through that difficult time and blesses them. So when I am in a difficult time in my life, I just remember that it will 'come to pass' and I will see God's blessing again."

One of my favorite Bible verses is Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (NIV) Some people misquote it by stopping too soon. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good" and they stop there, as if this promise pertains to everyone. But according to the rest of the verse, the verse is a promise only, "to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (NASV) Without Christ, everything does not always work for the good. Sometimes it just gets worse. You never see any point to the suffering - just more soil, and no seeds.

Sometimes God uses these events to bring us into a relationship with Him. 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." Even our memory verse in Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

You see this played out when Jesus was eating at Simon the Pharisee's home, a woman came in and began weeping, and washing Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. It is believed that not only did she use the tears that fell from her eyes, but the tears that she had collected all of her lives. One of the most precious possessions of every Jewish woman was a *tear bottle*. With it they would collect their tears whenever they wept due to some sorrow in their life. The bottle was full of the tears of all the suffering and grief they endured in their life. It was precious and irreplaceable. It is believed that this woman brought her tear bottle and emptied it out on the feet of Jesus. And Jesus' response in great compassion was, "Daughter, your sins are forgiven." How do you think she felt after that - depressed? She was probably giddy with joy and full of love for Christ. Out of sorrow joy emerges.

Even Jesus knows what it feels like. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said he was overwhelmed with great sorrow.

³⁶Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." ³⁹Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Matthew 26:36-42.

But Jesus didn't cling to the olive trees in Gethsemane refusing to go to the cross. He accepted the suffering of the cross, so that your sins and mine could be forgiven. On Good Friday, we buried the seed of our joy in the sorrow of Jesus suffering and death. And then came Easter!

If the sorrow in your life is due to difficult circumstances, don't wallow in it for long. Find something positive to do. While you are weeping, in hope and trust in God, plant the seeds of joy that one day will blossom again. You might actually go out and plant flower seeds in the garden, watering them with your tears. Then when the flowers come up, recognize what God has done in your life since that time and how God has blessed you. Better yet, in your times of sorrow, go to others who might be in a worse condition than you are in and do something for them. You can lock yourself away in a pity party, or go out to sow seeds of hope and joy in someone else's life. It requires trust in God that something good will come out of it. Psalm 126:5-6 says, "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him."