

The Dove Mourns: Lamenting Our Sin

Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. | April 2020

We all have heard the plaintive cry of a dove. In fact, it is called the mourning dove because of its low, mournful cry. In the Bible, the metaphor of a dove is used in many ways. Most significantly, it represents the Holy Spirit. But in several places in Scripture the dove is a figure of mourning. Hezekiah moaned like a dove when he considered his premature death without having produced an heir to the Davidic throne (Isa. 38:14). Isaiah used the figure of a mourning dove as he grieved over both the sin of the people and approaching judgment (Isa. 59:11). Ezekiel used the dove to describe the remnant entering exile as mourning over their sins (Ezek. 7:16).

Over the last couple of weeks, I have produced brief essays as public reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant difficulties. As I have considered the work of God in the pandemic and our responses, I drew from Amos 3 in relating God to the roaring lion, and I offered some appropriate responses. Next, I cited Psalm 42 and focused on a renewed desire for public worship, describing the Christian as a deer panting. In this article, I want to focus on the dove mourning as a mirror of our sorrow for and confession of sin.

In these days of isolation, uncertainty, and physical deprivation, we are grieving over many things: loneliness, loss of work and income, suffering from the virus, and the death of loved ones. We, however, above all should grieve over our sins. Let the mourning dove call us to grieve for and repent of our sins.

To aid in this exercise, I direct your attention to the Westminster Larger Catechism question and answer 76:

“What is repentance unto life? Repentance unto life is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and word of God, whereby, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sin, and upon the apprehension of God’s mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, he so grieves for and hates his sins, as that he turns from them all to God, purposing and endeavouring constantly to walk with him in all the ways of new obedience.”

True repentance grows in the soil of grief and hatred of sin. None of us grieves over sin as he ought or desires. We learn from the Larger Catechism (and the Scripture from which it is composed) that spiritual mourning is the product of God's grace: "*Repentance unto life is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and word of God.*" Part of the Spirit's work in sanctification is to increase our sorrow for sin. He will convict us of sin and create in us a godly sorrow. Aware of our cold hearts, we should plead with God by his Spirit to work this spiritual emotion in us. He will do so, because Christ has purchased the grace of godly sorrow for us.

The more sensitive we are to God's holiness and our sin, the more we will mourn over sin. The Savior taught in Matthew 5:4: "Blessed *are* they that mourn: for they shall be comforted." Luke records the Lord's expansion of His teaching in Luke 6:21, 25, "Blessed *are* you who weep now: for you shall laugh.... Woe *to you* who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep". This mourning over sin is the beginning of repentance. The proud person glosses over sin; but the humble person mourns his sin.

The Savior uses hyperbole to highlight that the world seeks to alleviate its conscience through amusements and the pursuit of pleasure. He warns that if we seek to gloss over our sin or numb ourselves to its reality, we might laugh now, but we will mourn for eternity.

On the other hand, if we own our sin and mourn over it, we will know God's comfort now and for eternity. You will laugh as you revel in the reality of what God has done for us and in us.

The Spirit, however, does not work in a vacuum. Notice in the Catechism "*and the word of God.*" The Spirit uses Scripture to expose our sin: revealing "the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sin." God will expose our sins through the Word read and preached. Each day as you read Scripture – and weekly as you sit under preaching – ask the Spirit to search you (Ps. 139:23, 24). Use the law of God to examine yourself. The exposition of the law in the Westminster Larger Catechism 91-153 is very useful for this exercise. My wife and I currently are reading through this exposition together.

However, you must not let your self-examination degenerate into morbid introspection. Your self-examination should draw you to Christ, "*and upon*

the apprehension of God's mercy in Christ to such as are penitent." God manifests His glory in pardoning sinners (Exodus 34:6, 7).

As you learn on the one hand the heinous nature of your sin, and on the other the wonder of pardon, you will begin to mourn your sin, "he so grieves for and hates his sins." Such mourning is the beginning of true repentance. Paul names it "godly sorrow" (2 Cor. 7:9-11).

Another instrument to develop true mourning over sin is to reflect on our grievous past sins. The Psalmist models the usefulness of such reflection (Ps. 25:7). He had been forgiven, but he was mindful of the heinousness of "the sins of [his] youth" in the sight of God. As we grow in grace, the Spirit will bring to mind not only our current sins, but also those from the past, not that we would stand accused before the divine tribunal of God's justice, but rather that we might humble ourselves and cast ourselves on Christ.

Repentance that springs from the soil of godly sorrow produces confession of our sins and a wholehearted desire to turn from them in obedience, "*he turns from them all to God, purposing and endeavouring constantly to walk with him in all the ways of new obedience.*"

The Lion has roared. God clearly is manifesting his displeasure with our sins: personally, ecclesiastically, and culturally. Let us mourn our sins and seek His mercy and compassion (Lam. 3:22, 23).

Begin with yourself. As I wrote above, examine your life by the law of God. Ask the Spirit to reveal your sinful acts, as well as your thoughts and attitudes. As the Spirit shines his searchlight into your heart, He will cultivate sorrow that leads to repentance and confession.

We should also mourn and confess the sins of the church: worldliness, unbelief, pride, violation of the Lord's Day and God's worship. Examine Christ's message to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2, 3) to discover some of the perennial sins of the church.

Mourn and confess the sins of the world. God is judging the nations for their idolatry and corruption. But let us come closer to home. Is not God judging the United States? In a previous post I have already mentioned particularly wicked sins prevalent in our land, but it is worth calling to

mind once again. Approximately, 140,000 abortions have been performed in this calendar year alone (since January 1, 2020). We have perverted the holy relationship of marriage with sexual promiscuity, adultery, pornography, and sodomy. Amongst our many idols are sports and materialism.

One useful tool in our mourning and confession is fasting. When coupled with prayer, fasting is a divinely appointed means of grace. One of the primary purposes of fasting is to afflict our souls through our bodies so that we mourn over sin.

Fasting is a testimony of our self-abasement before God when we desire to confess guilt before him. We discover a clear example of this in Joel 2:12-16:

“Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to Me with all your heart, all with fasting, weeping and mourning; and rend your heart but not your garments. Now return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger abounding in lovingkindness, and relenting of evil. Who knows whether He will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him, even a grain offering and a libation for the Lord your God? Blow a trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and the nursing infants.”

Calvin commented on this passage,

“He cries out for them to hasten to sackcloth and ashes, to weeping and fasting, that is, to prostrate themselves before the Lord also with outward testimonies. Indeed, sackcloth and ashes were perhaps more appropriate to those times; but there is no doubt that meeting and weeping and fasting, and like activities, apply equally to our age whenever the condition of our affairs so demands. For since this is a holy exercise both for the humbling of men and of their confession of humility, why should we use it less than the ancients did in similar need? . . . No, it is an excellent aid for believers today (as it always was) and a profitable admonition to arouse them in order that they may not provoke God more and more by their excessive confidence and negligence . . .” (*Calvin’s Institutes* IV, Ch. 12, Sec 17).

We see here that fasting, when united with prayer, is a means of humbling ourselves before God in order to express our true sorrow and repentance.

When we hear the dove's plaintive cry, let our hearts echo that cry. May God give us grace to mourn, repent, and confess our sins. Remember God pardons all who seek Him in Christ Jesus and confess their sins (Lev. 26:40-45; 1 Jn. 1:9).

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