

COMPASSED BY COMPASSION

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I love gardening. I love getting my hands in the dirt. A day without even a few minutes spent in the garden for me is a sorry day!

We love picking fresh, crisp, flavoursome home-produce which has no artificial sprays or contaminants. My motto used to be, if you can't eat it, why grow it? How much I missed with that attitude, for I now love growing the flowers too ... ah, the exquisite colours and fragrances, yes, **even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these!**

Over the years I have learned a few lessons about gardening. When I first started to grow vegetables I went crazy and bent my back with the digging fork and dug every spare patch of dirt up. I overplanted and when time came to harvest we had too much for a while, then nothing. I soon learned to space the plantings to ensure a continuous and manageable supply.

Another valuable lesson I have learned is that you get more out of one small plot with intensive attention to the soil culture, than from ten times the area without due care.

The same thing applies to the way we read and study the Bible. Now, don't get me wrong. There is a time to read whole chapters and big chunks in one sitting. But if that's all we do, we'll end up missing so many nutrients and necessary supplements by more focused cultivation.

Let me give an example of intensive gardening. Let's do a word-study on *compassion*. Let's see what this one word will yield for our encouragement and nourishment;

When Jesus saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion to the depths of his being, for they were harassed and dejected, like sheep who have no shepherd (Matt. 9: 36).

The words I have underlined are actually only one word in the Greek (the noun is *splagchna* --- try saying that out loud!). It's the strongest word the Greeks had for heart-felt pity. ⁽¹⁾

If you read the old **King James Version** you will be familiar with the expression "bowels of mercy". This antiquated expression was an attempt to capture the essence of its meaning, for before modern science, the bowels were considered the depths of one's inner emotional being. And who hasn't felt knots in their tummy when anxious or angry?

The Greek word for 'compassion' thus describes the kind of tender pity and compassion that moves one to the very core of their being. Today we talk about a heart filled with

¹ The verb is $\Sigma \pi \lambda \alpha \rho \chi \nu \acute{\iota} \xi \omicron \mu \alpha \iota$ (*splagchnizomai*)

compassion. Apart from being used in some of the parables of Jesus, **the NT only ever uses this word to describe Jesus!**

JESUS WAS MOVED WITH COMPASSION WHEN HE SAW THE OPPRESSED

Our text tells us that **when he saw the crowds, Jesus was moved with compassion to the depths of his being, for they were harassed and dejected, like sheep who have no shepherd.**

The first word which describes this crowd is **harassed**. (²) William Barclay says, it can describe a corpse which is *flayed* and *mangled*; someone who is *plundered* by rapacious men, or *vexed* by those without pity, or treated with *wanton insolence*; some[one] who is utterly *wearied* by a journey which seems to know no end. (³)

Some translations read they **fainted**, but as you can see, that's not the idea at all. No, it's far stronger --- they were **distressed, harried**, as though being hunted. **Bullied** says it all.

When we add the metaphor of sheep with no shepherd, the picture is one of people who are wounded by packs of wild animals or torn by wandering through harsh terrain and thorn bushes.

The second word describing the people is **dejected**. They were **downcast, depressed**. (⁴)

So, it seems to me, there is more to this crowds' **harassed and dejected** state than the mere fact they had been walking around following Jesus all day long. They were more than simply tired and fatigued and fainting.

There are a number of references prior to this incident where we discover that the Pharisees were lurking in the background. Opposition to Jesus' popular teaching and healing ministry from those who should have been good and kind shepherds to the people was growing and threatening. William Barclay expresses the situation well;

The Jewish leaders, who should have been giving men strength to live, were bewildering men with subtle arguments about the Law, which had no help and comfort in them. When they should have been helping men to stand upright, they were bowing them down under the intolerable burden of the Scribal Law. They were offering men a religion which was a burden instead of a support.

We must always remember that the Christian religion exists, not to discourage, but to encourage, not to weigh men down with burdens, but to lift them up with wings. (⁵)

It is a fact that goats do very well without a shepherd. They can survive in the wild by themselves. Sheep do not. Without a shepherd sheep do not survive the dangers that

² Ἐκ λύω (*eklyō*) seems to come from a word that means to flay, to lacerate, hence to vex and annoy.

³ William Barclay, *Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1: The Daily Study Bible*, St Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 7th Impression, 1968, p364 (Italics original).

⁴ ἐρρλιμμένολι (from ῥίπτω *rhiptō*) meaning to be laid low, prostrate, to be cast about and blown around.

⁵ *Op Cit.* p365

threaten from every quarter. Seeing these bullied and downcast crowds with no one to help them, Jesus **was moved with compassion to the depths of his being**.

1. JESUS WAS MOVED WITH COMPASSION WHEN HE SAW THE SICK

And when he came out, he saw a great multitude, and **felt compassion for them, and healed their sick** (Matthew 14: 14). The motive driving Jesus' healings was his deep compassion. When he saw the sea of hurting humanity, he keenly felt their pain.

Scripture says --- and this is very interesting! --- Jesus' healing ministry was **so that what was predicted through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 'He himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases** (Is. 53: 4; Matt. 8: 16-17)

Most Christians have the idea that Jesus bore our sins and dealt with the sin-problem only at Calvary. Matthew says Jesus' ministry of bearing our sin and its consequent sickness started way before the cross. Anybody who has been heavily involved in Christian ministry knows how much it drains and saps one's own physical, mental and spiritual strength!

THE BLIND

Every category of sickness moved Jesus, but it's worth noting a few of the specific categories that are mentioned as drawing out his tender compassion. Note his compassion for the blind ... **And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they received their sight, and followed him** (Matt. 20:34).

There is no miracle of the giving of sight recorded anywhere in the Old Testament, and Anglican theologian **Leon Morris** makes the startling claim that, giving sight to the blind is the most frequent healing miracle among Jesus' mighty works. (⁶) OT prophecies predicted how the Messiah would give sight to the blind, however, the NT adds that this particular miracle sprang from his compassionate heart.

THE TORMENTED

Next, folks tormented by demons also moved Jesus with compassion. Do you recall that father's distress over the torment which demonic possession was causing his young boy? Remember how the demon would throw the youngster into the fire? This sad situation evinced deep compassion from Jesus. The father's desperate cry caused Jesus to be **deeply moved with compassion** (Mark 9: 22).

2. JESUS WAS MOVED WITH COMPASSION WHEN HE SAW THE HUNGRY

Seeing tired and hungry people, Jesus called his disciples saying, **"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way"** (Matt. 15: 32).

⁶ **Leon Morris**, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Eerdmans. Grand Rapids, MI, 1992, p 232, 276

The true Christian heart cannot but be deeply moved to action when it sees hunger.

3. JESUS WAS MOVED WITH COMPASSION WHEN HE SAW LONELINESS

When Jesus saw a man who was **full of leprosy, covered** from head to toe with the foul discharge from that disease, we are told that Jesus **was filled with compassion** and **reached out his hand and touched** that lonely social outcast (Mark 1: 41). Being abandoned by his own family and community from the living death of leprosy stirred Jesus to the core for this leprous man.

4. JESUS WAS MOVED WITH COMPASSION WHEN HE SAW SORROW AND GRIEF

As Jesus entered the village of Nain he saw a funeral procession. The body was that of a widow's only son. Learning of the tragedy, and no doubt hearing her wailing and seeing her inexpressible grief, we read that Jesus' **heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry"** (Lk 7: 11f).

The English words as translated here by the NIV, **his heart went out**, are the very same word we are by now familiar with --- **he was deeply moved with compassion** (⁷)

Jesus' deep compassion moved him deeply. He had to do something! He had to intervene. He wiped the grieving widow's tears away by a miracle of resurrection. That night that mother had dinner with her boy and kissed him goodnight!

LAZARUS

Remember the time Jesus stood at the grave of his good friend Lazarus who had been dead for four days (John 11)? Seeing the tears of the friends and the crying of the sisters Mary and Martha, we are told how Jesus was **deeply moved** (v. 38).

This is a different word to the one translated as **moved deeply with compassion**. This companion word --- good gardeners practice companion planting! --- is a fairly rare word. Its etiology is taken from the snorting of horses in battle, and thus carries the idea of being seized by intense emotion which causes one to let out an almost involuntary groaning, even to the point of a physical shaking. (⁸)

Just pronouncing this word in English conveys a feeling of deep emotion --- something like, **embrim-ah-oh-may**. Jesus was **deeply moved in spirit and troubled** (v. 33). Thus, we see how empathetically Jesus entered into the sorrow and tragic sense of loss of his dearest friends. **Jesus wept** (v. 35). (⁹) Jesus indeed was **a man acquainted with our sorrows**.

⁷ ἔσπλαγχνισθη (*splagchnizomai*).

⁸ ἔμβριμαμαι (*embrimaomai*)

⁹ ἔδακρυσεν (from δακρῦω/*dakryō*) which means to shed tears.

THE GREEK GOD OF APATHY

Let's dig a bit deeper into this story about Lazarus and Jesus' groaning in spirit. Let's pretend for the minute that you are a First Century reader of John's Gospel. Although

Greek was the universal language of the day, and John wrote his Gospel in a Mediterranean world which was universally influenced by the Greek mindset. To the Greek reader of that First Century the primary characteristic of 'God' was what he called "*apatheia*". Our word 'apathy' is derived from it, but when the Greek spoke of *apatheia* he did not think of apathy as we do. It conveyed far more than the idea of disinterest.

To the Greek *apatheia* was the total inability to feel any emotion whatsoever. So, how did they come to say that God was unable to feel any emotion at all? Well, they reasoned like this. If we can feel sorrow or joy, happiness or grief, it means that somebody else can affect us. Someone else can in great measure determine our joy or sorrow. And if such an outsider can affect our emotional well-being, then they have a certain power over us. And if they are affecting our emotions they are in real measure greater than we are.

But nobody can have power over God. That is impossible. This must therefore mean that God is incapable of feeling any emotion whatsoever. Nobody is able to bring joy or sorrow to God. So, that is why the Greeks believed in an insular God, a God completely isolated from all of his creatures. Nobody must be able to influence God! He is in heaven undisturbed in perfect bliss. He is unperturbed by the fate and condition of men.

God, to the Greeks, then, was *incapable* of feeling any emotion at all. God is *apathetic*!

In total contrast, now understand the portrayal of Jesus being moved to tears and deep compassion, indeed almost tormented by grief and sorrow as he stands by Lazarus' tomb. He is moved to the very core of his being with the grief of everybody surrounding him.

Since John's Gospel portrays Jesus as the one who *dwells in the bosom of the Father*, Jesus alone is able to perfectly *declare* and *explain* to us exactly who God the Father is (*Jn 1: 18*). It is Christianity alone which brought the world-shattering idea into that pagan worldview that the God of the Bible is full of compassion towards human pain and need.

Jesus reveals the heart of God to men and women. Jesus shows us that God is not *apathetic*. Glorious contrast! Our heavenly Father is Himself deeply moved by the world's troubles. How amazing to know that our heavenly Father (whose eye is on the sparrow and who has numbered the hairs upon our heads) also feels each *individual's* pain and desperation. (¹⁰)

The God of the Bible is not serenely removed from His peoples' suffering nor their cries. In our afflictions, he is afflicted.

¹⁰ Contrary to the false idea that the God of the OT was nothing like this, see for instance, *Exodus 3: 7,9* where the LORD tells Moses, "I have seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry, because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings ... and now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them."

PERSECUTING JESUS

When Saul was persecuting the church, it was as though he was attacking and hurting Jesus Christ himself. The risen Jesus said to Saul with deep sadness, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*”? Saul asks, “Who are you Lord?” Jesus answers, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9: 4-5). Wow! The risen Jesus, now exalted to the Father’s right hand in glory, still feels the pain of each and every one of his own --- as though the pain was being personally inflicted upon him!

CONCLUSION

We have noted that in the NT, it is only Jesus who is ever said to have been deeply moved with compassion. But now, we who are “in Christ” are also exhorted to demonstrate his tender heart and compassion to one another (Phil. 2: 1; Col. 3: 12).

I am convinced it will only be when the world of the poor, needy, sick, suffering, lonely, oppressed, hungry and lost, senses the compassion of Christ touching the very depths of our own hearts that then, and only then, will they sense the power of his Gospel invitation. When we show compassion to others we are most like Jesus!

Finally, whoever you are, whatever your deeply challenging situation may be now, I pray you will be encouraged to bring your need to the Jesus of the Bible. His heart is drawn to you right now! And he is both able and willing to touch you with his healing presence and compassion in this very moment. **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13: 8).**

Yes, what blessings we receive by cultivating the rich soil of his holy word. This article goes out bathed in prayer for you, my friend! Is not your heart strangely warmed as you meditate on his compassion? Is he not altogether lovely? Lift your heart up to give him your praise and thanks right now! You are **Compassioned By Compassion!**

A PRAYER

We thank You, our heavenly Father, for the gift of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord who has revealed to us Your compassionate heart. Grant us, O LORD God, to reflect Your loving heart by doing all we can to those we meet in need this day. For Your glory. Through Christ Jesus our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

