

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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Pity

(Jerry Fite)

Pity is “*the feeling of sorrow for the suffering or misfortunes of others*”. Sometimes the word conveys regret for something not happening, like “*it is a pity we can’t be friends.*” But most of the time, the term is dealing with real, not theoretical circumstances, causing sorrow to rise in caring observers.

Women boiling their own children for food when Babylon tightened their famine squeeze on Jerusalem is appalling, and creates deep sorrow for those women in such circumstances. Jeremiah records the history: “*The hands of pitiful women have boiled their own children; they were their food in the destruction of the daughter of my people (Lamentations 4:10)*”. At first glance, we might pity these women. But Jeremiah is not seeking our pity. He desires we know the heart of the women, who with pity choose a quick death for their children in helping others, instead of a slow death benefiting no one.

While the options for these women were not good, pity was not mere emotion void of action. The women were not full of pity and empty of solutions. Neither is God when He looks upon His

people with pity. Isaiah makes “*mention of the lovingkindness of Jehovah...in His love and in His pity he redeemed them, and He bare them, and carried them all the days of old*” (Isaiah 63:7, 9). God was full of pity knowing Job’s suffering, and blessed him in the end. James unites Job’s patience with God’s merciful action when he writes, “*...ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord, how that the Lord is full of pity and merciful*” (James 5:11).

Friedrich Nietzsche attacks Christianity for its pity. He writes, “*Christianity is called the religion of pity. Pity stands opposed to the tonic emotions which heighten our vitality: it has a depressing effect. We are deprived of strength when we feel pity. That loss of strength which suffering as such inflicts on life is still further increased and multiplied by pity. Pity makes suffering contagious.*” (Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Antichrist*. Reprinted in *The Portable Nietzsche*. Penguin. 1954. pp. 572-573)

Nietzsche sees the Christian “sympathy” multiplying suffering, because the Christian is feeling with the one who is suffer-

ing. Therefore pity “makes suffering contagious.”

While it is true the Christian caring for others issues in suffering with those who suffer (*I Corinthians 11:25-26*), feeling the plight of others is not an end in itself. It is the means to moving one to help the sufferer. Pity or sympathy for another’s plight is not a depressing emotion depriving one of energy, but a self-identification with another vitalizing one to help the sufferer.

The Christian is not to just observe the pitiable plight of the fatherless and widows, but is to “*visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction*” (James 1:27). Like God who has “*pity on the poor*” and “*the souls of the needy He will save*” (Psalm 72:13), we too with pity take action to help the needy.

I do not want your pity! If pity is a mere sorrowful gaze at my suffering, please look away. But Christian pity or sympathy is more than a look, but a connection unto helpful action. Pity does not deprive us of strength, encouraging more suffering, but vitalizes us to seek the well-being of others in true love. How is Christian sympathy weak?