

“...and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.” (Gen 24:67)

I've gotten a number of questions of late regarding comments I made in January 2019 regarding mourning. Today I would like to take a little time today to consider the idea of appropriate mourning, in the hope that it will address these questions and try to provide some scriptural framing to how we ought to mourn.

To do this, we'll look a little bit at two concepts – natural and inordinate affections.

Mourning, specifically in response to the loss of a beloved friend, is a natural reaction, with its proper time, as Solomon tell us

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;” (Ecc 3:1 & 4)

Solomon explains why this is:

“In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him.” (Ecc 7:14)

Our God has set these the events in our lives that generate these two reactions – joy and sorrow, laughter and weeping – over against one another. He has established a balance for us in these things that should be very comforting and satisfying to us when we see it.

Now, when I say He has established a balance, it is important to understand that it is His balance, and that might be at odds with our understanding of balance. It doesn't mean that for every one thing that draws you to sorrow, you will have one thing that draws you to joy. It is a balance that perhaps we never see or understand fully. We shouldn't see it as a 'well I deserve some good to balance out the bad I've experienced' because that is a fleshly view of it. God has ordained all these things and we should be joyful when it is appropriate, and considerate when under the hand of adversity.

Mourning the loss of a friend is the result of what Scripture calls 'natural affection'. Natural affection is a thing that at times gets in our way, preventing us from following after Christ to our fullest

“He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Mat 10:37)

And though it can be a stumbling-block, it isn't a thing to reject, because a lack of this natural affection is a characteristic of heathen behavior:

“Without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful.” (Rom 1:31)

“Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good,” (2Ti 3:3)

Many of the expositors look at this natural affection as being directed only toward people's children, and point to the examples in the Old Testament where they sacrificed their children to false gods:

“And they built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.” (Jer 32:35)

I don't argue that this is a clear indication that they have no natural affection for their children. I have had difficulty wrapping my brain around that behavior for a long time – even while I see what the parents of this nation do to their children – but to sacrifice them by fire to these false gods is simply unfathomable to me. So I don't argue that this is part of the meaning.

It cuts it short to make it only about that, though, in my estimation. My primary thinking here is that the language doesn't say they're without natural affection toward their offspring. It isn't specific in that fashion, which at leaves it open to a more general application.

I am of the belief the affection that especially a mother has for her child is the *exemplar* application of natural affection, but not **the** application. It is descriptive of how you should feel toward your parents, siblings and other relatives. You shouldn't have to try and feel affection toward them, it should simply come naturally, like breathing. Is it as deep towards others as what you feel toward your children? Not likely, but proper natural affection comes from the same well-spring, the same source. I think it applies to members of the body of Christ as well, as the new man we strive to put on has a different nature than that of the old, and part of that nature should be a deep-seated, naturally occurring affection for your fellow laborers.

The other reason I'm not inclined to think this is just about parental love for children is the meaning of the word. What is translated 'without natural affection' is actually one Greek word – *astorgos* (Strong's 794) which is a compound word, made up of alpha as a negative particle and a derivative of *stergo*, which means to cherish affectionately. The word simply doesn't have a specific application to parental love and affection

toward their children, and where a word isn't specific, I don't think it provides value to try and be super narrow with it.

So go with me here that being 'without natural affection' starts with a general selfishness and lack of caring about anyone else on the planet, and you can drill into lots of different versions of that. This would include the worst possible expression of it, i.e., having such a lack of natural affection that you would burn your children alive or otherwise sacrifice them to a pagan god to satisfy your own personal desires.

Put another way, having natural affection means you are naturally drawn with cords of love and kindness toward a person. That fountain of feeling toward a person is called 'natural' for a reason, and it is the source of grief when we lose a loved one.

Now for purposes of this discussion, all this is juxtaposed against inordinate affection:

“Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” (Col 3:5)

Inordinate affection is typically associated with sexual immorality by the expositors. I don't want to dismiss that thinking, but the word translated inordinate affection is the Greek word *pathos*. As far as I can tell, and setting aside the modern English usage of the word, its etymology doesn't lend itself to the idea that it means deep sexual immorality. That's at least part of what evil concupiscence means and I don't think, based on the context, that it is intended to be repetitious. This word *pathos* is only translated this way here, and it is the phrase "inordinate affection" that is the translation, not either of the words individually. The other two times this word is used are Romans 1:26 – "vile affections" and 1 Th 4:5 – "Not in the lust of concupiscence". That combination with concupiscence also drives me away from the idea that this just means sexual immorality. When *pathos* applies to that specifically, it is combined with another word.

In the Greek, *pathos* means suffering, experience or emotion. Bear in mind I don't claim to be a language expert, and I don't speak Greek, but I'm questioning the translation here a smidge, and certainly some of the exposition. I think the idea here is much, much broader than just depraved sexual desires. I **think** what it's pointing at is what we have spent a lot of hours and words looking into in this place – love of the world and love of the flesh, i.e., having a life-driving focus on anything that is not Christ. Look back at verse 2

“Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.” (Col 3:2)

The focus on things of earth to the exclusion of things of God is an inordinate affection. That can absolutely be some flesh satisfying lust, but it can also be something that

seems innocuous and possibly appears on its face to be a natural affection – attachment to your children, your parents, friends, etc. – these can certainly all be inordinate affections when juxtaposed to the affection we should have toward Christ.

What matters here, like so, so many things, is what spirit is present in your mourning. Are you driven by a natural or an inordinate affection? Are you considering the proper things when you mourn or are you in the pit of ‘fairness’ and focused solely on what was taken away from you, like a child when they lose their favorite plushy? There are a couple of examples that help us to examine our own behavior and perhaps answer that question comparatively. Ultimately, the spirit which motivates you to behave a certain way is an internal thing that others can only judge based on presentation. You have to examine the spirit with which you operate in a matter and come to peace with it – your spirit is ultimately a thing between you and God.

Let’s turn our attention first to what has always been a perplexing, though perhaps understandable display of mourning driven by inordinate affection in the story of David and Absalom.

The story occurs over multiple chapters of 2 Samuel, so I’ll try to condense it down a bit to refresh our memories. Absalom was the third of David’s sons, born to him while he ruled in Hebron (2 Sa 3:3). Absalom was a very popular fellow, being very fair to look upon (2 Sa 14:25), but after killing his half-brother Amnon for raping his sister Tamar, he fled to Geshur to escape punishment for this grievous crime, spending three years in exile (2 Sa 13:38).

David was quite angry with Absalom for having killed his brother, and though it doesn’t explicitly say it in Scripture, there is some oddity to some of the wording in 2 Sa 13 that leads some scholars to believe David actually tried to have Absalom killed multiple times. This does beg the question, whether David was really interested in dealing with him, given how David frequently deals smartly with those who displease him. This is an indication of the inordinate affection David had toward Absalom. Whether it was just being enamored with Absalom’s physical beauty, a “hey, that good looking guy is MY kid” kind of thing, or his wit, charm and craftiness, or something else that drew David toward Absalom isn’t clear. What we know is that he was drawn to this very wicked young man above his other children.

When Joab convinces David to give into his affection for Absalom and bring him back from exile (an interesting bit of scripture to tear down in and of itself), he spends two more years forbidden from coming into David’s presence, because when he was brought from Geshur, David orders “...Let him turn to his own house, and let him not see my face” (2 Sa 14:24). As another example of the fine character we’re dealing with here, see how Absalom finally manages to get an audience with the king:

“Therefore Absalom sent for Joab, to have sent him to the king; but he would not come to him: and when he sent again the second time, he would not come. Therefore he said unto his servants, See, Joab's field is near mine, and he hath barley there; go and set it on fire. And Absalom's servants set the field on fire. Then Joab arose, and came to Absalom unto his house, and said unto him, Wherefore have thy servants set my field on fire? And Absalom answered Joab, Behold, I sent unto thee, saying, Come hither, that I may send thee to the king, to say, Wherefore am I come from Geshur? it had been good for me to have been there still: now therefore let me see the king's face; and if there be any iniquity in me, let him kill me. So Joab came to the king, and told him: and when he had called for Absalom, he came to the king, and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king: and the king kissed Absalom.” (2Sa 14:29-33)

He behaves like a petulant child when out of his father’s presence and when dealing with his servants, but in his presence puts on the face of the obedient and dutiful son. He’s a typical son of Belial, but he stands as a great warning for us. This seemed like natural affection to David, I’m sure. It’s his son, after all, and as parents are we not drawn explicitly toward them, to put the best possible face on what they do?

David didn’t see his son’s true nature, and Absalom takes full advantage of this blind-spot his father has. He immediately turned this renewed favor against David, building up a considerable political base, appointing himself a judge by making it appear to the people coming to obtain judgement from the king that David was too busy to deal with the common folk. Placing himself in that role as the King’s judge – and David not doing anything about it – allowed Absalom to erode David’s authority and the people’s love for him setting up his rebellion with a lie against God.

“And it came to pass after forty years, that Absalom said unto the king, I pray thee, let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed unto the LORD, in Hebron. For thy servant vowed a vow while I abode at Geshur in Syria, saying, If the LORD shall bring me again indeed to Jerusalem, then I will serve the LORD. And the king said unto him, Go in peace. So he arose, and went to Hebron. But Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, As soon as ye hear the sound of the trumpet, then ye shall say, Absalom reigneth in Hebron.” (2Sa 15:7-10)

David flees when tidings come to him of the rebellion, rather than subjecting the city to the violence of armed insurrection, being willing to hand the city over to Absalom instead. When battle is finally engaged, it goes badly for Absalom and his revolt:

“...there was there a great slaughter that day of twenty thousand men. For the battle was there scattered over the face of all the country: and the wood devoured more people that day than the sword devoured. And Absalom met the servants of David. And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the

thick boughs of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away. And a certain man saw it, and told Joab, and said, Behold, I saw Absalom hanged in an oak. And Joab said unto the man that told him, And, behold, thou sawest him, and why didst thou not smite him there to the ground? and I would have given thee ten shekels of silver, and a girdle. And the man said unto Joab, Though I should receive a thousand shekels of silver in mine hand, yet would I not put forth mine hand against the king's son: for in our hearing the king charged thee and Abishai and Ittai, saying, Beware that none touch the young man Absalom. Otherwise I should have wrought falsehood against mine own life: for there is no matter hid from the king, and thou thyself wouldest have set thyself against me. Then said Joab, I may not tarry thus with thee. And he took three darts in his hand, and thrust them through the heart of Absalom, while he was yet alive in the midst of the oak. And ten young men that bare Joab's armour compassed about and smote Absalom, and slew him.” (2Sa 18:7-15)

After some more drama surrounding how to tell David the news, he does finally hear it, and this is his reaction:

“And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2Sa 18:33)

Now, this in and of itself isn't problematic I don't think. He went into as private a space as he could at the moment find. His words are definitely over the top for me, and indicate where his spirit is at, but we all fail and fall short. The inordinate affection he had toward Absalom quickly shows its face, however.

“But the king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2Sa 19:4)

This wasn't in that same moment. This very public exhibition of mourning for this reprobate child who had raised his hand seeking David's life was a prolonged thing, seen by everyone, and eventually drew sharp rebuke from Joab:

“And Joab came into the house to the king, and said, Thou hast shamed this day the faces of all thy servants, which this day have saved thy life, and the lives of thy sons and of thy daughters, and the lives of thy wives, and the lives of thy concubines; In that thou lovest thine enemies, and hatest thy friends. For thou hast declared this day, that thou regardest neither princes nor servants: for this day I perceive, that if Absalom had lived, and all we had died this day, then it had pleased thee well.” (2Sa 19:5-6)

Remember also that David was a very public figure, and the people hung on what he said and did from very early on in his reign:

“And all the people took notice of it, and it pleased them: as whatsoever the king did pleased all the people.” (2Sa 3:36)

Joab, for all his flaws, is given words that strike at the heart of it “...*in that thou lovest thine enemies and hatest thy friends*” – there’s what inordinate affection looks like; you’re so enamored with the thing you can’t see that what you love is an enemy of your soul. You love the things of the flesh more than the things of your friend, savior and King, Jesus Christ. When you mourn the loss of those things in any way that makes it look like you love them or seek them more than you love or seek Christ, your mourning has crossed a line and you ought to seriously consider where your priorities are. Immediately. I say ‘things’, but I don’t just mean your fancy car or house, I mean people, too, as David does here. This is *inordinate* affection. Affection that is utterly misplaced and moves you away from where your affections are supposed to lie – toward God.

This isn’t about a length of time, either. I have talked to a few of you about this, and can’t find a single answer to the question – “how long is it appropriate to mourn a friend” because I don’t think there is a set answer to that. Which brings me to the next example I want to consider:

“And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.” (Gen 24:67)

This might not be immediately obvious from reading the story of Sarah’s death, but it had been *three years* that Isaac was in a clear and obvious state of mourning. I don’t get the sense from the way it is presented or any of the expositors that this was an inappropriate thing, some over the top, ‘look at me, being bereaved’ sort of thing. Look a few verses before this:

“And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide: and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, the camels were coming.” (Gen 24:63)

This “meditate” is a good word for us. It isn’t just sitting and “clearing your mind” and whatever the current “relaxation technique” that’s being pimped is. This is about thinking about God and your sins. How you measure up to His standards and how you can change your life to adhere more closely to them. This is a proper and good use of mourning a lost friend because as I’ve said before, death should be a stark, in our face reminder of our own mortality and the price we ultimately owe for disobedience.

Death should make us conscious, **acutely** conscious of our own mortality and the disposition of our soul. Part of mourning is not just the loss of that soul whom we loved, but that deep-seated consideration that anyone sensible of their sins is going to have when they consider their own end.

“Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.” (Jas 4:9)

There is a good and proper exercise of our hearts and our spirits that happens when we consider the death of a loved one and how we must meet the same end. When we consider that end, it hopefully makes us lift up our hearts and voices in prayer to our God to forgive us of our sins. Isaac was in the field contemplating these sorts of things, I am certain. And that comfort is our hope.

“Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:” (1Pe 1:6-7)

Our heaviness is for but a season to try our faith, to see if we will as Job, through the trials of the affliction *sin not, nor charge God foolishly* (Job 1:22). We have a reasonable expectation that we will be brought through the heaviness to the other side, as Isaac, being comforted by some new thing in our lives, whether that is a new relationship or a new understanding of our place at God’s table – they are set one against the other. That is, of course, if we keep the ways of the new man about us and don’t let that natural affection progress in the flesh to become an inordinate one.

So I firmly believe it is acceptable before God to mourn, and sometimes even to rend your clothes in mourning, and wear sackcloth, as it were (I’m not sure where you would get sackcloth these days, they seemed to have a lot of it back in the day, though). It’s okay to have bad days where you are in extreme heaviness, though others aren’t, and it’s okay to have good days where you no longer mourn, even if others still might. No one has to “just get over it”. We do have to help one another through it, and watch for each other not to create inordinate affections out of those things that we should love dearest in the world.

We mourn so that we might turn to the Lord and say as David did:

“Hear, O LORD, and have mercy upon me: LORD, be thou my helper. Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness; To the end that my glory may sing praise to thee, and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks unto thee for ever.” (Psa 30:10-12)