

## "Hair and Crowds"

How many hairs do you have on your head? Have you ever counted them? (Oh, you do it once a week, huh!). For some of us, it gets easier the older we get!

Hair authorities tell us people have between 90,000 and 150,000 hairs on their head. Blondes have the most, about 150,000. Brown-haired people have about 110,000. Black-haired folk about 100,000. Red-haired individuals about 90,000. And, some bald-headed men about 3 or 4!

In case you wanted to know, and even if you didn't want to know, we lose about 50-100 hairs every day. On average, our hair grows about 6 inches in a year (a half inch per month). Men's hair grows faster than women's hair.

By now you're probably thinking, "Hair, hair! Why art thou telling us all of this?" Well, because *Jesus once talked about hair!* It's in a part of Scripture where Jesus tells us how infinitely God cares for each of us. He told His disciples that if they followed Him they might not always be appreciated and accepted and treated well. But, He says, don't be afraid! Just fear God, and you won't have to fear anything or anyone else.

Jesus continues: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (Matthew 10:29). Sparrows were actually sold as food. Anybody hungry? About the cheapest of food! Two for a penny. In Luke's gospel it says, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight" (Luke 12:6). Even when a little sparrow lies dead on the ground, God is aware of that and cares! Jesus assures us: "So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:31). Every time we see a dead bird on the ground it should remind us of God's infinite concern for each of us.

Then Jesus said, "Even the hairs of your head are all counted" (Matthew 10:30). All 90,000 of the hairs on redheads! All 150,000 on blondes! Actually, if you go online, you can find a way to estimate how many hairs are on your head without counting them all. You have to measure your head, the square inches, etc. But God knows exactly how many hairs are on your head! *Jesus is reminding us of the meticulous, thorough, personal, infinite care of the heavenly Father for you!*

Maybe you need to be reminded of that today. Sometimes we may feel that God doesn't care. A lot of people believe there's a God, but not the kind of God who is involved in His creation and who personally cares for each of us. But each of us matters to God.

Illust. Early on in my Christian life I was teaching a Sunday School class at my home church. I don't remember the topic, but a man in that class who had just lost his young, beautiful wife spoke up and said, "God's too busy to care about me – He has too much else to do." I tried my hardest to assure him, "No, that's not true", but I'm not sure my words helped that much.

*God cares about you.* When your health is failing...when your child or grandchild is becoming a behavioral problem...when you have expensive house repairs or the car is giving out and you

can hardly afford another one. God knows and cares when you're struggling with depression, or anxiety...when a friend has let you know...when you've lost a loved one and feel like life isn't worth living anymore. God sees and smiles when you experience some of the happy and joyful experiences of life and know that those times are a gift from His loving hands. And God's loving care for each of us not only spans this life and the temporal realm, but also is seen in His provision for our *spiritual and eternal* needs. He longs for us to be close to Him, to experience assurance that we saved, and that we'll be with Him forever.

So, every so often it's good to be reminded of God's profound care for each of us. *The God who knows the number of hairs on our head and notices when one little sparrow falls to the ground, is the same heavenly Father who cares about you.* As the song goes, "I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free; for His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me."

But you know what, as important as this is, the full gospel is not just about *hair* – that God is so intimate and personal that He has numbered the hairs on our head...it's about *the crowd* too.

That truth is expressed in another Scripture from Matthew. Chapter 9. "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:35-36). Notice, when he saw the *crowds*, he had *compassion* on them.

Jesus spent the 3 years of His ministry giving His life away for others. He saw the big picture, the multitudes, and the need that all people had for life and hope. *Jesus taught us and demonstrated that God cares for the multitudes, the crowds!*

Sometimes we can be too self-focused in our faith. It's all about me – me, me, me. Jesus and me. My relationship with Jesus. I think maybe I've run into too many Christians who are self-centered and self-focused. To put these together – *the self-centered Christian* – is an oxymoron. You know what an "oxymoron" is, don't you? It's a "self-contradicting word or group of words."

So, to use the phrase "self-centered Christian" is an oxymoron because those two things don't go together. If you're a Christian you're not to be a self-centered person. Part of what "salvation" means is that I no longer put myself at the center of life. I put God there. I put Christ there. I put others there. When I was in theological seminary, one of the popular phrases going around to describe Jesus was that Jesus was "a man for others". He was!

*God cares for the crowds. For all humanity. For everyone!* God cares about the people of Afghanistan. An article in the Lancaster paper just a few days ago said, "Female employees in the Kabul city government have been told to stay home, with work only allowed for those who cannot be replaced by men...detailing the latest restrictions on women by the new Taliban rulers. In their previous rule in the 1990's, the Taliban had barred girls and women from schools, jobs and public life. In recent days, the new Taliban government issued several decrees rolling back the rights of girls and women. It told female middle and high school students that they could not

return to school for the time being, while boys in those grades resumed studies this weekend." God cares about the people of Afghanistan that sided with the Americans and were left behind, in a country where dissidents are easily executed, often by beheading.

God cares about the people along our Mexican-U.S. border. The masses of people wanting to get into our country. God cares about the border patrol officials given the impossible task of trying to organize and process the hordes of human beings coming at them, all because over the last number of years both Republican and Democratic leaders have not adopted a fair and reasonable immigration policy. God cares about the people living close to the border whose properties are sometimes overrun by illegal immigrants, and the states forced to take the masses of illegal immigrants being relocated there.

Just about every day I get an email from Voice of the Martyrs telling the story of a Christian, or Christians, somewhere in the world experiencing heavy persecution (even death) because of their faith. One source suggests 65 countries where Christians experience persecution. Bibles are banned. Churches are banned. Christians are silenced. The *Open Door* watchdog organization reports that *340 million* Christians are living in countries where they might suffer high levels of persecution. One website lists the top 50 countries where persecution is the greatest. Ranked from #1 (worst) on: North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Eritrea, Yemen, Iran, Nigeria, India, Iraq, Syria, Sudan...just the first 13 of 50. God cares about these children of His, and the organizations trying to help them.

I've taken some trips abroad. Besides the trips to Kenya, trips to other countries – Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Israel. Each time it expands my vision of how vast the world is. God not only created and is concerned about people like me, people in the U.S. – His love and concern embraces the whole world.

God also cares about the people in the neighborhood around the church, the people in your neighborhood. Their needs and the things they're struggling with. God cares about those who don't Jesus, who are struggling with life and to make sense of life, people like sheep without the Good Shepherd. God is concerned that we in the church can get beyond our selfish interests in just having a "nice worship service" to demonstrating an active concern for our neighbors and people beyond. There are congregations so concerned that their pastor and staff focus on the needs of those within the congregation that that congregation loses its sense of mission to those outside the church.

A few weeks ago I met with Jack Crowley, President of Water Street Mission. Jack was a young person in the youth group in a church I served in suburban Philadelphia. He went to college at F & M and stayed in the Lancaster area. I was impressed with Jack's personal faith, his evangelical faith, and also his heart for people. More than once he emphasized how his life's work has focused on Isaiah 61. "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to

proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair" (Isaiah 61:1-3). Jack's personal relationship with Jesus drives him to be concerned about people in Lancaster and its suburbs: the homeless, those down on their luck.

So there we have it. Hair, and crowds. The God who notices every time a sparrow falls to the ground is the God who cares for *you* – He even knows the number of hairs on your head. But He's also the God who sees the big picture, whose love embraces *the whole world – every* person. This "being a Christian" stuff is not just about my own personal relationship with Jesus (as important as that is), it's about getting beyond ourselves and showing compassion towards the multitudes of people in an unjust, hurting world.

Today is World Communion Sunday. We join Christians around the world in celebrating the Lord's Supper, in committing ourselves to the Christ who gave Himself for all.

"This is my body, which is given for *you*" (Luke 22:19).

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28).

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