

Grief and Gratitude

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Excerpts from *Two Hands: Grief and Gratitude in the Christian Life*

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"The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I'll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I have only gratitude, I'll become saccharine and won't develop much compassion for other people's suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible.

—“The Geography of Sorrow: Francis Weller on Navigating Our Losses,” an interview by Tim McKee in *The Sun Magazine* (October 2015).

the Psalms move between grief and gratitude/praise

"And I say, 'It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.'" —Psalm 77:10

"But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you." —Psalm 10:14

"Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning." —Psalm 30:5

definition of lament as a verb (used with object)

to feel or express sorrow or regret for death or some form of loss, to mourn for or over

definition of lament as a verb (used without object)

to feel, show, or express grief, sorrow, or regret, to mourn deeply

synonyms for lament as a verb

bemoan, deplore, regret, moan, bewail, sob, rue, wail, cry, bawl, hurt, repine, weep, howl

definition of lament as a noun

an expression of grief or sorrow, sometimes crying out passionately, sometimes formal, such as in verse, song, elegy, or dirge

synonyms for lament as a noun

groan, howl, lamentation, moan, dirge, wail

gratitude nurtures relationships

"When I acknowledge a gift received, I acknowledge a bond that binds me to the giver. . . . The one who says 'thank you' to another really says, 'We belong together.' Giver and thanksgiver belong together."

—David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness*

obstacles to sitting with grief and dwelling in gratitude

- consumer culture
- emphasis on optimism
- stoicism or fear of showing emotion
- fear that grief will lead to permanent despair
- fear that thankfulness negates achievement
- others for you . . .

the cost of discipleship

Matthew, Mark, and Luke record an incident when a rich man comes and asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. In Luke, the man is called a “ruler” (Luke 18:18), and in Matthew we learn that he is young (Matthew 19:20). All three gospels record that Jesus responds to the young ruler’s question by mentioning the Ten Commandments. The man replies that he has kept these commandments since his youth. Mark records that “Jesus, looking at him, loved him” (Mark 10:21). Jesus tells the man to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and come and follow him.

The man, hearing these words, “was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (verse 22). What would have happened if the man had said to Jesus, at that moment or perhaps later, “I need help to do that”? What would have happened if the man had brought his grief and sadness to Jesus, as we see modeled in so many psalms? The man’s grief juxtaposed with Jesus’ love for him creates a fascinating picture of the challenges of discipleship. This story calls us to grieve when we see family and friends walking away from Jesus because discipleship is hard, and Jesus’ love for the man in the story calls us to thankfulness.

Jesus weeps

The Gospels record two incidents when Jesus weeps. One of them occurs on Palm Sunday. Jesus enters the city from the east, coming down a long hill with a view of the city spread out before him. As Jesus looks over Jerusalem, he weeps that the inhabitants did not recognize “the things that make for peace. . . . You did not recognize the time of your visitation from God” (Luke 19:22). Jesus grieves over the lack of responsiveness to God’s grace that he has seen in his ministry. Jesus’ tears reveal the depth of God’s love for human beings. The passage doesn’t mention thankfulness directly, but Jesus’ tears, as a manifestation of his deep love for the people of Israel, call us to thankfulness for God’s amazing love.

Jesus also cried earlier in his ministry when his friend Lazarus died. Children often enjoy memorizing John 11:35 because in many translations it is only two words, the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept” (KJV, NIV, ESV, and others). The story of Jesus’ tears in this incident reveals a complex interweaving of grief and gratitude.

The story begins when Jesus is some distance from Jerusalem. He receives a message from Lazarus’s sisters, Mary and Martha, that Lazarus—“he whom you love”—is sick (John 11:3). Jesus lingers two more days there, telling his disciples that Lazarus’s illness “does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory” (verse 4).

When Jesus approaches the village Bethany, Martha meets him on the outskirts of the village to tell him that if he had arrived sooner, Lazarus would not have died. Jesus says that her brother will rise again. Martha affirms that Lazarus will rise in the resurrection on the last day. Jesus then tells Mary, “I am the

resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (verses 25–26).

Martha goes to get Mary, and when Mary approaches Jesus, she weeps. Other friends are there, weeping, too. Jesus is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (verse 33), and he weeps along with these mourners. Lazarus’s friends take Jesus to the tomb. Jesus is still “greatly disturbed” (verse 38), and he asks the mourners to take away the stone. Then he calls Lazarus to come out, and Lazarus does.

No reader can doubt the intensity of Jesus’ grief in this story. Mixed into this story of sadness and grief is amazing power and love. We are thankful that we see Jesus weeping with others, expressing sadness with such openness, solidarity, and care. We are grateful for the model of friendship we see between Jesus and the three siblings, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha.

We also note that Jesus had a significant theological conversation with a woman, Martha, something amazing in his time and a wonderful precursor to the role that women will have in ministry in the future. I am deeply thankful for Jesus’ profound and respectful interactions with women.

We rejoice that Jesus not only engages emotively with the needs, feelings, and minds of his friends, but he raises Lazarus as a sign that Jesus himself is “the resurrection and the life” (verse 25).