

GOOD GRIEF

KEEPING THE HEART 7

Sometimes we need to grieve and sorrow.



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Good Grief

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Keeping the Heart 7
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Good Grief

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Welcome to *Good Grief*

The Christian life is not all happiness and rejoicing. It is that, to be sure, but many reasons exist why Christians will sorrow and grieve, and we need to know how to do so to the glory of God.

Sorrowing and grieving are part of our calling as followers of Jesus Christ, the Man of Sorrows. We don't need to deny or avoid these affections. Rather, we must embrace them when they are appropriate, and allow them to do their sanctifying and edifying work in our souls. In this brief study, we'll consider how to keep our hearts with all diligence for a proper use of these affections.

Good Grief is Part 7 of a multi-part study on the heart, the affections, and how we can exercise diligence in making sure that what issues from our hearts is what the Lord by His Spirit intends.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Sin in Our Lives

Then he began to curse and swear, saying, "I do not know the Man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So he went out and wept bitterly.
Matthew 26.74, 75

Fun and games!

It's easy for people in our churches these days to get the impression that Christianity is all about being happy. Our music is happy. Our worship services are happy. We sponsor every kind of program and activity to keep our members happy. We don't use offensive words in our preaching because offensive words don't make people happy. Christians are supposed to be a happy bunch, and that's that.

Except, of course, that's not a very Biblical way of thinking about Christianity. Jesus, after all, was described as the "Man of Sorrows" (Is. 53.3-5). He knew grief and pain, wept when it was appropriate, and felt deeply the confusion and lostness of the people of His day. Jesus would reject outright any idea that being a Christian means being in a state of unremitting, perpetual happiness. He would say there are good reasons for Christians to sorrow and grieve, and Peter would be the first to say, "Amen!"

Rather than expecting our Christian life to be one crescendo of happiness after another, what C. S. Lewis observed is more accurate: "I think the art of life consists in tackling each immediate evil as well as we can." And not infrequently, tackling the evil in our lives can be cause for grieving and sorrowing.

These affections are important, and we must neither deny them nor resign ourselves to experiencing them in merely worldly ways, especially when the grief we know is of our own making.

The sorrow of sin

The Apostle Peter understood that evil in our souls and our world is no laughing matter. The power of sin – the law of sin that operates within us, and causes us to do things contrary to our own best intentions – this is not a happy condition, and we ought not gloss it over with a few praise choruses or some cheap pastoral "attaboy."

In that courtyard on that cold spring night, Peter was suddenly confronted with the terrible depths of his sin, and with his own inability, despite his best intentions, to resist temptation when it suddenly appeared before him. His fear misplaced, love for self kicked in, whatever gratitude Peter may have felt for having known and followed Jesus evaporated, and the only hope he hoped was that of surviving this suddenly uncomfortable situation.

German theologian Helmut Thielicke described temptation as being "constantly in the situation of wanting to be untrue to God. It means being constantly on the point of freeing ourselves from God." Falling through temptation into sin, therefore, is nothing short of outright rebellion against the Lord, rejecting His grace, denying His truth, defying His sovereignty, and asserting our own autonomous determination to do whatever we damn well please.

And this condition exists in every one of us. Even more, like Peter, we tend all too often to give in to that condition, to surrender to the law of sin rather than cling to the Law of God. The sin that continues within us ought to cause us to weep and cry before the Lord, filling us with sorrow at how long and slowly our sanctification proceeds, and how quick we can be to repudiate Jesus' suffering to gain some momentary advantage for our fleshly desires.

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Grieving for our sin

Would you simply shrug off your sin and say, “Oh well, what can I do? I’m a sinner and God knows it. He will accept me anyway”?

You should grieve if you find such an attitude of defiance and presumption lingering in the halls of your soul.

The immediate evil we must tackle every day begins in our own hearts. If we are not grieving and sorrowing for the sin that remains within us, for the easy way we add lashes to the back and thorns to the brow of our suffering Savior, then something is deeply wrong within us. Is it that we do not understand the extremity of Jesus’ suffering or the magnitude of His grace? Is it that we do not hate sin, as all believers are commanded (Ps. 97.10), but that we think we can know the salvation of Christ and continue to indulge the awful weight of sin, as if Jesus’ death and resurrection meant nothing more than a free ticket to heaven?

Grieving for our sins is good grief. Look at Peter. Look into your own soul. See there the very sorts of attitudes, affections, values, and thoughts that Peter – the prince of Apostles! – knew, and cry out to our Lord with tears for mercy and grace to help in your time of need.

For reflection

1. Why do you suppose so much of contemporary Christianity focuses mainly on being happy? Is that entirely bad? Is it a problem?
2. What did Isaiah mean by referring to Jesus as the “Man of Sorrows”? Should we share any of Jesus’ sorrows?
3. Why did Peter weep when the cock crowed? Do you ever feel this way about your own sin? How do you respond when you do?

Next steps – Conversation: Do your Christian friends think there’s a place for grieving and sorrowing in the life of faith? Ask some of them. Specifically, talk with them about this matter of grieving for our sins. Ask how they cope with the sorrow their sins cause them, and what they do about it. Pray together that God might give you good grief for the sin that lingers in your soul, so that you might confess your sins and repent of them sincerely before the Lord.

2 Loss of a Loved One

Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them. Acts 9.39

Weeping with those who weep

Peter understood that there are appropriate times for expressing sorrow and for grieving. The Christian life is not all happiness and fun, although that's the impression many churches seem determined to give. Peter knew that sin, for example, is nothing to be happy about, especially when it rears its ugly head in your own soul, fomenting rebellion against the God Who died for you. When we consider the sin that remains within us, we should weep and cry before the Lord, seeking mercy and grace to help us repent of all our wicked ways.

But Peter also experienced sorrow, as we all do, in the loss of loved ones. The reality of death remains one of the evils we must contend with as we pursue the art of living for our Lord Jesus Christ.

As Peter entered that room where Dorcas lay dead, the weeping and sorrowing of those women must have affected him deeply. How tenderly he came among them, gladly listening as they talked of her many virtues and showed him the beautiful garments she had made. Who of us could have failed to join in their weeping, as they talked about the enormity of their loss? Only a fool would have rebuked those grieving women, insisting they should be happy in their friend's "home-going." Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, partly because of the sin of unbelief that hung like a shroud on everyone present, and partly because of the sorrow He felt with His friends Mary and Martha, and in His own loss.

Sorrowing for loved ones

Christians grieve for the loss of our loved ones. We'll miss them and all the things we loved about them. We regret no longer being able to enjoy their company, and sorrow will overwhelm us at the thought they may have suffered, or we may not have told them, as clearly as we should have, how much we loved them.

If we try to keep ourselves from grieving at the loss of loved ones, pasting on some smiley face of spiritual superiority, we will stifle a holy affection rising in our hearts, and fail to realize something intrinsically and wonderfully human.

We sorrow for the loss of loved ones, and that sorrowing can last a long while. Years after the loss of a loved one, we may yet be piqued to tears by some sudden memory or special reminder. There is nothing wrong in this, and such grieving is nothing for which we should feel shame or doubt.

Grieving for loved ones reminds us that death is a tragedy. Death is not the way it's supposed to be. When we love someone, and that love becomes a vital part of our lives, it is wrong, and unnatural, to have that love wrested from us by grisly death. Grief makes us intolerant of death and impatient for eternal life and joy.

Hope in the midst of sorrow

But sorrow for the loss of loved ones must not be the only or even the commanding affection. If our loved one was a believer, we can certainly have the assurance that we will see him or her again one day, and our fellowship and love will be renewed without end. If our loved one was not a believer, we can still fall back on the grace and mercy of the Lord. We cannot possibly know what may have transpired between our loved one and the Lord at the very moment of death. Let us mix our sorrow, therefore, with hope. And even if this loved one is to be lost forever, we can rest in the hope that, in the new heavens and the new earth, even this terrible loss will somehow make sense, and we will be able to be at peace.

Grieving for the loss of loved ones is good grief; and as we go through this experience, we will eventually be

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able to help others when they, like the friends of Dorcas, are faced with the loss of one dear and close to them. Grieving reminds us of the ravages of sin, and can encourage us to hate sin and all its effects.

But grieving with Godly grief can also nurture love in our hearts, increase thanksgiving for God's sovereign power, strengthen hope for the glory of God, and embolden us to face the daily evil in our lives with a renewed commitment to tackling it as best we can in the Lord.

We must not stifle our grief when grief is appropriate. We are called to weep with those who weep and to share in the suffering of our fellow believers (Eccl. 3.4; Rom. 12.15; 1 Cor. 12.26), especially when that suffering relates to the loss of a loved one. Such good grief can strengthen our hearts for life's great challenges and renew us in love, gratitude, hope, and courage.

For reflection

1. Why do we say that death is "not the way it's supposed to be"?
2. How do people try to cope with the death of a loved one? Are there any problems with any of these coping mechanisms?
3. Suggest some ways that believers can comfort one another at times of loss.

Next steps – Conversation: How do you deal with the loss of a loved one? How do your friends handle such difficult situations? Ask around and see what you can learn. Be prepared to come alongside someone who is grieving the loss of a loved one, to affirm their grieving and provide the comforting presence of the Lord.

3 The Plight of the Lost

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; and assuredly, I say to you, you shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” Luke 13.34, 35

Wrong attitudes toward the lost

It is impossible to imagine Jesus saying this with a smiling face. “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (Jn. 1.11). The pain of rejection must have been added to by the grief Jesus felt at the lost condition of the people of Jerusalem. They had hardened their hearts toward God, despising His prophets, disobeying His Word, and now, repudiating His Messiah.

The terrible plight of lost men and women grieved Jesus Christ, and it should grieve us as well.

I cringe whenever I hear some preacher ranting on against secular humanists, or read some Christian blogger spouting off against Darwinists, postmodernists, or any of the other usual suspects against whom Christians rage these days. We see very little of such an attitude in the Scriptures, whether of the Old or the New Testaments. Yes, there is an occasional prophetic outburst, but for the most part, the prophets’ harshest condemnations are for those who claim to believe in God.

Still, the condemnations and words of judgment proclaimed against the unbelieving world by prophets and apostles can be very frightening (cf. Rom. 1.18-32).

We must remember that lost people are at all times *lost!* They denounce our faith because they have not come to know the Lord. They heap scorn upon our convictions, mock us as ignorant and unreasoning, and practically go into apoplexy over our moral positions.

But what is it about any of those responses that justifies our resorting to name-calling, character assassination, or condescending and demeaning language? Jesus sorrowed over the lost condition of the people of His day, and we must abide no other attitude toward the unbelievers of our own.

Sorrowing and grieving for the plight of the lost is yet another form of good grief we must allow to grow in our hearts.

Without hope

Lost people do not know the Lord. As we have seen, they have put their hopes for meaning and happiness in things which cannot last, and time and time again they’ve been disappointed and discouraged. They spend their days in a mindset of getting and spending, keeping up with – if not ahead of – their friends and co-workers, and trying to feel good about their chosen course in life. They live with guilt, which they must continually rationalize, and the fear of death haunts them throughout their lives (Heb. 2.15). Because they can discover no deeply satisfying meaning and purpose to life, they fill their waking hours with work, diversions, and various inane and sensual experiences, all the while continually asking themselves, “Am I having fun yet?”

Just think of the bumper stickers you see on the cars that race past you on the highway: “He who dies with the most toys wins.” “Life’s a bitch; then you die.” “How’s that ‘hope and change’ workin’ out for ya?” “My kid can beat up your kid.” “How’s my driving: 1-800- EAT _ _ _ _” Do these sound like the boastings of people who are really satisfied with their lives? Lost people are lost! Dead in their trespasses and sins, as Paul puts it. Cut off from the hope and promises of God. Without an anchor for their souls. Trapped in a

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downward spiral of unbelief, idolatry, sensuality, sin, and death (cf. Eph. 2.1-12; Rom. 1.18-32).

And their prospects *beyond* this life are bleaker still. No wonder Jesus so often warned His hearers about the eternal judgment to come.

Grieve for the lost

If the confusion, fear, uncertainty, vanity, and ultimate destiny of the lost doesn't break our hearts, then we don't have the heart of Jesus beating in our souls. Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, was deeply grieved over the sinful plight of the people of His day. If we would be truly His followers, then we must train our hearts to grieve for the lost people around us in our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, communities – even our churches.

Who knows, if such grief becomes established in our souls, it may lead us to reach out to the people around us with the Good News of hope and forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

Grieving and sorrowing for the lost condition of the people around us is good grief. Let us seek the Lord to nurture such sympathetic sorrowing in our souls.

For reflection

1. Read Romans 3 and Ephesians 2.1-12. What is it about being lost that should cause us to have compassion toward lost people?
2. Suggest some ways we might pray for those whose lostness causes us to grieve.
3. Should we fear to befriend lost people? Why or why not? What dangers do we need to be mindful of in so doing? What opportunities can we expect?

Next steps - Conversation: Spend some time talking with some unbelievers – at work or school, or among your friends. Ask about their hopes in life. What are they trying to experience as “the good life”? How’s that working out for them? Do they have fears? Concerns? Ask your unbelieving friends if you can pray for them, and find out some specific requests. Then take these to the Lord daily.

4 The Sorrow of Disappointment

*Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
But when the desire comes, it is a tree of life.* Proverbs 13.12

Childish disappointment

To this day I can remember the disappointment I experienced one Christmas as a child, when I did not receive the specific gift I was sure would be waiting for me under the tree.

I had done everything I knew to do to make it clear to my parents what they should buy, but somehow my hints and conversation just didn't register. That morning I felt as though someone had crushed my chest, and I must have moped and sulked for the better part of the day – being careful, of course, not to foist my disappointment on my parents.

Not getting the Christmas gift you expect is certainly a minor reason for becoming upset. But hope deferred or dashed can cause true grief, for example, when a child fails to embrace our faith, a spouse lets us down in a crucial matter, a colleague secures the promotion we hoped to receive, or a pastor falls into moral sin. At such times our hearts can truly become “sick” with negative affections ranging from betrayal to slight to hurt, anger, resentment, and sadness.

Such grief is normal, although it should be only temporary, as we look to the Lord at such times and renew our true hope in Him.

The power of hope

Hope is a powerful affection. It creates anticipation and thus guides what we think about, how we plan, and what we do. Hope lines up a variety of positive affections in our heart – eagerness, joy, delight, satisfaction, and so forth – and sets them to a slow fuse. The closer we come to realizing our hope, the brighter the fuses of those affections burn as we anticipate a bursting of each one once our hope has been achieved.

Hope affects not only how we think and feel, but how we act as well. We tend to bring our present behavior into line with our hope – at least, I did as kid, particularly as Christmas drew closer and closer each year. If we hope to get that promotion we're going to act and work in ways that signal to the appropriate parties that we're the right person for the job. If we hope to find just the right home and neighborhood, we will search the web, work with a realtor, and keep looking until we find what we want. In the hope that our children will grow up to love the Lord, we eagerly teach and encourage them in His ways.

In a very real way, hope lays out a scenario for our future which brings together all our strongest desires into a single focus. The more we hope, and the more our hope takes in larger chunks of our life, the more invested in that scenario we become, mind, heart, will, and life.

So, let someone pull that rug out from under us, or circumstances conspire to dash our dreams, and we can certainly experience a kind of grief that is understandable and not to be denied.

Hope deferred or dashed does indeed bring us to a kind of grief; on the other hand, how much more does hope realized cause us to know satisfaction, contentment, and joy.

The Christian hope

The Christian hope is that we may know God in His glory and, knowing Him thus, may live for His glory every day, in every area of our lives (Rom. 5.1, 2; 2 Cor. 3.12-18). This is a hope that does not disappoint

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because God's Word cannot fail. We may truly enter the glory of the Lord and know that mysterious, weighty, fearful, but loving presence upon us every day of our lives.

The glory of God envelops and transforms us, so that we go forth from that hope into the further hope of living for the glory of God in our daily lives. As we live out the hope of glory, people cannot help but notice, not the sickness of our hearts, but the joy and confidence and peace that define us. And when they see that hope, many will want to know the reason for it (1 Pet. 3.15).

Hope deferred can bring us to a kind of good grief. But the Christian's hope is never deferred. Though we may temporarily sorrow over setbacks, disappointments, and failures of one kind or another, we renew our hope by focusing on Jesus, drawing near to Him, and preparing in Him for whatever next immediate evil we may be called upon to tackle.

For reflection

1. Explain some of the differences between hope and disappointment. How do they affect one another?
2. What are some ways that people typically try to cope with disappointment? Are there any problems with any of these?
3. What do we mean by saying that the Christian hope is the "hope of glory"? How does this hope help us to overcome the grief that comes with various kinds of disappointment?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some of your friends about "hope deferred." Have they ever experienced the sorrow that comes from disappointment? How did they handle it? Suggest some ways that Christians can encourage those around them who are feeling heartsick over some hope deferred.

5 Trials and Suffering

After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. Job 3.1

Very great suffering

Job's cursing the day of his birth is certainly understandable. He had lost his children and all his property. He was stricken in his body with a horrible, wasting disease. His wife denounced and condemned him. And his prospects for redress and restoration were slim to none. Yes, he overstated his grief by invoking a curse on the day of his birth, but I rather suspect the Lord would not have rebuked him for that.

Job's suffering was, indeed, very great (Job 2.13). Probably few of us have ever experienced so much hardship at one time. His was a grief occasioned by loss and disappointment, and enveloped in a kind of hopelessness that would grow as his trial continued.

We have all known various kinds of trials and sufferings, and all trials and sufferings bring pain and sorrow. What we don't need on such occasions are friends like Job's, who have our "problem" all figured out and are determined to forestall our grieving by getting us to see things their way. What we need instead is space to grieve and time to wait on the God of all comfort to renew our strength and our hope.

Sovereignty and suffering

A common mistake that people make when they come to various trials is to think that somehow God is out to get them. Either He wasn't watching and so couldn't keep us from our suffering, or He had it in for us somehow. And so we cry out, "Why, Lord!"

This is where Job was, and his grief would grow deeper the longer his confusion persisted, ultimately rising to indignation and anger at God for refusing to answer his cries. Job's cry, "Why, Lord!" was never answered, at least, not as he demanded.

But there is some truth to that cry, because nothing happens to us outside the scope of God's sovereign power and will. Paul reminds us that God works all things according to the counsel of His will, and this includes the trials and sufferings we occasionally endure (Eph. 1.11). Job understood that, but rather than rest in God's sovereign power and infinite wisdom, and wait for the Lord to restore, if not his prosperity and progeny, at least his peace, Job let the grief of his suffering and his disappointment with his friends get the best of him. He *demand*ed that God explain the reason for this pain. He insisted that he would stand before the Lord of heaven and earth and hold Him to account for causing a good man to suffer.

When trials or suffering befall us, we must surely grieve. But we must not allow our grieving to lead us to presume. We cannot know the mind of God in such matters, any more than Job could. But though we cannot penetrate the mysteries of the eternal will of God, we can know God and rest in Him, so that we find in Him the comfort, assurance, and loving kindness that we need in the midst of our trials and suffering.

Responding to suffering and trials

The way to do this is to receive all our trials and suffering with thanksgiving and praise to God. Remembering that the God we fear and love, loves us with an everlasting and unchanging love, we can always find reasons to give thanks, as we fix our hope again, not on our fickle circumstances, but on our unchanging God.

When the pain and sorrow of suffering descend upon us, we may certainly expect to grieve for our situation. However, even in the midst of grieving, if we give thanks to God and persist in praising and waiting on Him, we will find strength from God to bear up under our trials in a way that transforms and renews us through them (cf. Jms. 1.2-4; Rom. 5.3-5).

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Through thanksgiving and praise, even in the midst of sorrow and pain, we may renew hope and all the power of hope to realign our thoughts, renew our hearts, strengthen our resolve, and keep us on a course of seeking God's glory and living to that glory in every aspect of our lives.

The grief and sorrow that come with trials and suffering are good grief, but we must guard against our grief leading us to bitterness, presumption, and rebellion against God. Grief of any kind should signal us to seek the Lord in praise and thanksgiving, so that even as we grieve, we are renewing hope and increasing the likelihood that God Himself, the Father of all comforts (2 Cor. 1.3, 4), will meet us in the midst of our good grief and enfold us with His glory.

For reflection

1. Is it true that trials and suffering can be good for us? In what ways? Share from your own experience.
2. God did not answer Job's demand, but Job ended up being at peace (Job 42). What did God do for Job in the midst of his sufferings?
3. Meditate on Psalm 22. How can you see rejoicing and thanksgiving in the midst of suffering here? Compare this with Hebrews 12.1, 2. What should we learn from the example of Jesus?

Next steps – Preparation: Talk with some of your friends about the best ways to comfort those who are experiencing trials and suffering. Share your own thoughts and see what they think. How can we lead those who suffer to give thanks and praise to God, without, at the same time, negating the importance of their grieving?

6 Separation from the Lord

*For my soul is full of troubles,
And my life draws near to the grave.* Psalm 88.3

A psalm of suffering

Psalm 88 is best understood as a prophecy concerning the suffering of Christ. Here we encounter the grief of the Savior as He sank into His passion, alone, and feeling very far from God.

We cannot know what adversity led the sons of Korah to compose this psalm; however, we cannot miss the many allusions in the psalm to what Jesus experienced during His suffering on the cross. Jesus was abandoned by His friends (v. 8); truly, He had lost the only loved ones He'd ever known. He was forced to endure all the pain of all the sins of the world, and He suffered what the unrepentant will suffer for eternity in hell. His hopes, while not entirely dashed, were certainly set back, even as He knew they would be.

The physical and spiritual suffering He endured qualified Him above all men to receive the epithet, "Man of Sorrows."

But the greatest grief and sorrow that Jesus experienced as He hung on that cross was the sorrow of separation from His Father. The grief of separation resounds throughout Psalm 88. The suffering Savior cries day and night, but God does not respond (vv. 1, 2). God appears to remember Him no more (v. 5). He pours out wrath on His Son rather than eternal love (v. 7). He sends His Son to darkness and the grave, far from the light of eternal glory which is His true and familiar home (vv. 10-12). The Lord hides His face from the suffering One (v. 14).

Psalm 88 is one of the only psalms which does not recover from the negative affections with which it begins, but, instead, descends persistently to greater depths of sorrow, woe, and grief.

The grief of separation

Jesus shows us that there is no grief so great as the experience of being separated from God. Since, in the presence of the Lord we expect to know true glory, fullness of joy, and pleasure forever more (Ps. 16.11), it only makes sense that, separated from Him, we should know only sorrow, grief, and deepest dread.

Why, then, does this so seldom seem to be the case? Billions of people all over the world live in a condition of separation from God, and they seem not much troubled by it. Millions of believers routinely neglect to meet with God in His Word and prayer, and go off into their lives marching more in step with the world than with the Savior Who died for them. Why, then, do such people not experience what Jesus experienced when He knew Himself to be separated from God?

The answer is simple: Jesus had *come* from eternal glory. He had *dwelled* for all eternity past in the fullness and radiance of the love of the Father and Spirit. His brief earthly sojourn did not separate Him from that experience. Jesus maintained the joy and glory of that fellowship even as He trod the earth among sinful people such as we.

But the cross changed that. On the cross the Father, after a fashion, forsook His Son, because the Father is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and Jesus had become all evil in our place, for our redemption.

Jesus grieved and cried out and sorrowed because He had become separated from God. He knew better than anyone who ever lived what it means to be united with God and to participate in His glory. Jesus grieved because He knew what He was missing.

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We don't grieve to be separated from God because, for most of us, it's really no big deal.

The presence of the Lord

If we knew the presence of God more truly, we would be more sensitive to the grief of being separated from Him. If every day of our lives we experienced and lived out the hope of glory, and if we knew the love and peace and powerful indwelling presence of Christ more constantly, every day of our lives, then, when we neglect to enjoy the presence and pleasure of our God, we would experience the good grief such separation from our Father brings.

And that good grief will create in our hearts a longing for our Father, and will begin the process of our being restored to His presence once again.

For reflection

1. Read Psalm 88. Point out the references which seem to indicate sorrow and grief.
2. Do you think Jesus really sorrowed on the cross? Why? Should we share in His sorrow at all?
3. Meditate on 2 Corinthians 3.12-18. What does it mean to encounter God in His glory? When do you experience this? Does it grieve you to be separated from God?

Next steps – Preparation: Do you experience grief at being separated from God? Does it bother you that you don't pray more than you do? That your times in God's Word are not as many or as meaningful as you think they should be? That you so often give in to temptation and fall through it into sin? Talk about this with some of your Christian friends. How can you encourage one another to greater consistency in knowing the pleasure and joy of God's presence in your lives?

7 A Valley of Tears

*Blessed is the man whose strength is in You,
Whose heart is set on pilgrimage.
As they pass through the Valley of Baca,
They make it a spring;
The rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength;
Each one appears before God in Zion.* Psalm 84:5-7

A journey toward glory

Psalm 84 is a song for the journey of life. Its purpose is to provide focus and bolstering for taking on the immediate evils and daily travails of our earthly existence. Psalm 84 teaches us how to turn all our sorrows to strength and joy by helping us keep our eyes on the Lord.

The Valley of Baca, mentioned in verse 6, may have been an actual place in ancient Israel. However, more important is what it symbolizes. “Baca” in Hebrew means “weeping.” The true believer must pass through a good deal of weeping and grieving in this life. As we have seen, it is good to grieve when the circumstances call for grieving. However, it is not good to let grief get the best of us. Christians do not sorrow like unbelievers do, who have no hope. Because we have hope, we are able to turn our Valleys of Weeping into places of refreshment and renewal, so that we progress from strength to strength as we travel our journey toward the heavenly Zion.

Psalm 84 teaches us how to make our lives such a journey of victory and rejoicing, even in the midst of suffering and trials.

This is a psalm to meditate on frequently. Indeed, we should learn to sing this psalm and take it as a companion with us into every day of our lives. To that end, at the end of this article, I’m attaching a version of Psalm 84 set to a familiar hymn tune. I encourage you to learn and sing it frequently, so that whatever may be the grief and sorrow you endure, you’ll know how to turn your Valleys of Weeping into refreshing springs of hope, joy, and peace in the Lord. The times of weeping and grief cannot be avoided, but we do not need to succumb to or wallow in them, and Psalm 84 shows us how to turn our good grief into hope and renewal.

The vision of the end

Psalm 84 begins where it’s going to end – focused on our heavenly destination: “How lovely is your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts!” At the end of the psalm the sons of Korah – who were themselves gatekeepers in the temple at Jerusalem – declare, “For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand” (v. 10). They insist, “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.”

We are bound for an eternal dwelling place of glory, light, beauty, holiness, rejoicing, and wonder. That unseen destination is even now being prepared for us by our victorious Savior and King, and He will surely come again to receive us into His eternal glory. As we set our minds and hearts on that glorious City to Come, we will be in a position to be renewed, no matter the grief that comes our way.

We must train our souls to long for that glory – to hope in the glory of God, then and there, so that we may live in it here and now as well (v. 2). The way to do this is to present ourselves each day as living sacrifices to God, like birds offered up on the altar for His pleasure (v. 3; cf. Rom. 12.1, 2). If we fill our journey with sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, whatever we encounter along the way, we will be able to tackle and bear up under every evil, because our true focus and joy lie beyond our temporal circumstances in the presence of the unchanging Lord of glory (vv. 4, 5). In the midst of our trials, sufferings, disappointments, and losses, we

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do not compound our grief by separating from the Lord; instead, we seek Him earnestly in prayer and hide within Him as our Shield and Comfort (vv. 8, 9).

Our daily walk

Our daily walk follows the path of righteousness and uprightness, for we know that, whatever grief we must endure in this life, this path is the one along which we may expect to know every good blessing of God (v. 11).

This is what it means to trust in the Lord throughout our earthly sojourn (v. 12). We do not expect to avoid all sorrow and grief, but we prepare for it daily by focusing on our heavenly King and His eternal glory, singing His praises and seeking Him in prayer, living in obedience to His Word, come what may, and finding our comfort in His presence and promises. The art of life consists in tackling each immediate evil as best we can, accepting the good grief that comes our way, but overcoming it with renewed hope and joy in the Lord.

The course of our lives must go through the valley of grief, but all sorrow can be good grief if we know how to endure it as children of our heavenly King.

For reflection

1. Do you agree that this psalm is a good one to keep with us in our journey through life? Why or why not?
2. How would you describe your own vision of the destination of our lives? How do you keep that vision alive and nurture it? How does it affect your daily life?
3. In what ways can you see that this psalm brings forward many of the lessons we've gone over in this study?

Next steps – Transformation: Try singing Psalm 84. Learn it and sing it over and over, until it becomes a framework for thinking about your life and the various trials you must endure along the way. Share this psalm with some friends, and encourage them to learn it with you.

P S A L M 84

Tune: Holy Manna – Brethren, We Have Met to Worship

vv. 1-4

Lord of hosts, how sweet Your dwelling; how my soul longs for Your courts!
Let my soul with joy keep telling of Your grace forever more.
Like a bird upon the altar let my life to You belong.
Blest are they who never falter as they praise Your grace with song!

vv. 5-7

Blest are they whose strength is founded in Your strength, O Lord above.
All whose hearts in You are grounded journey in Your strength and love.
Though they weep with tears of sadness, grace shall all their way sustain.
In Your presence, filled with gladness, they shall conquer all their pain.

vv. 8-12

Lord of hosts, my prayer receiving, hear me, help me by Your grace!
In Your courts I stand believing; turn to me Your glorious face!
Lord, our sun, our shield, our glory, no good thing will You deny
To those who proclaim Your story, and who on Your grace rely.

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Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What do we mean by “good grief”? What would be some examples of good grief, and why is it important that we know how to experience this affection?
2. How can good grief help to strengthen our faith?
3. How can we keep good grief from becoming the kind of grief that defeats or depresses us?
4. What is our responsibility as Christians to one another during times of good grief?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study about good grief? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.