

GOOD GRIEF

STRONG SOULS (8)



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Good Grief

Good Grief
Strong Souls (8)
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Welcome to *Good Grief*

Believers in Jesus Christ ought not think that their lives will never know sorrow nor grieving. Our journey through life will take us through many dark valleys, where weeping and sorrowing are altogether proper and even necessary.

But we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Our grief is good grief, because it trains our heart to trust in the Lord in even the most difficult of situations. Grief can lead to hope, and hope can strengthen Christian character, strengthening our soul for greater faith and obedience.

We welcome the trials that will come our way, because we know that, even through the valley of the shadow of death, our Lord is with us.

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. A happy heart is a well-kept heart, or so we like to think.

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!"

In nurturing a well-kept heart as the foundation for a strong soul, we need a place for grief. 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 – grieving and sorrowing – 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 (Rom. 7.18-23) – 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 having become misplaced, love for self kicked in, whatever thanks Peter may have felt for having known and followed Jesus evaporated, and the only hope he harbored 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 please.

Nothing happy about that.

This condition or inclination exists in every one of us. Even more, like Peter, we tend all too often to give in

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to that inward law of sin, to surrender to self-love 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.

The path to Godliness is paved with sorrowful confession of sin (Ps. 32.1-6). If we're not grieving for our sins, we're not growing in the Lord.

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. And you should repent of such flippancy regarding your walk with the Lord, and seek a better pavement for your path.

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 our heart. 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)? Or that we think we can be saved 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.

A strong soul requires a well-kept heart, with all the essential affections working in harmony. Without good grief, the symphony of affections in your soul will be discordant, incomplete, and stifling for spiritual growth.

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: What are you harboring in your soul for which you should be grieving? Spend some time in prayer allowing the Lord to search you thoroughly (Ps. 139.23, 24). Confess and repent as He leads.

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. We live in a fallen world, in which the final nail has not yet been driven into the coffin of sin and death. Peter knew that sin and death are nothing to be happy about, especially when they rear their ugly head in your own soul, fomenting rebellion against the God Who died for you, or among those dear to 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. And when loved ones succumb to the power of death, we will sorrow with good grief at their passing.

Peter 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. Grieving and sorrowing at the death of a loved one is not a sign of little faith; it is an outpouring of love and a holy lamentation for the fallen condition of our world.

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 would not have joined 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 at 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, partly because of the sorrow He felt with His friends Mary and Martha, and for His own loss.

Sorrowing for loved ones

Christians grieve 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 can overwhelm us at the thought they may have suffered, or that we may not have told them, as clearly or as often as we could, 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. Certainly, we rejoice in the confidence that our believing loved ones are now in the Presence of the Lord and are suffering no more. But that joy runs deep, and it does not preclude our grieving to be bereft of one dear to us.

We sorrow for the loss of loved ones, and that sorrowing can last a long while. Years after a loved one has died, we may yet be moved 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.

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Hope amid sorrow

But sorrow for the loss of loved ones should not be the only or even the commanding affection. If our loved one was a believer, we can 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 at peace.

Grieving for the loss of loved ones is good grief; and as we go through this experience, we will eventually be 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 it can encourage us to hate sin and all its effects. And grieving summons us to drop the bucket of faith and hope into the deep well of believing joy, that we may know refreshment from the Lord even in the midst of our loss.

For grieving with Godly grief can 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. A well-kept heart grieves for one's own sin, and when loved ones are lost. Such good grief contributes to the overall strengthening of the soul.

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 during times of loss.

Next steps – Transformation: Spend some time in prayer, thanking the Lord for loved ones you have lost in recent years. Rejoice in His sovereign goodness, even as you grieve at the reminder of your own loss.

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 frightening (cf. Rom. 1.18-32; 2 Pet. 2.1-17; Jude 1.1-11).

Granted, we must alert the Church to strange winds of doctrine that can blow us off course with the Lord. But it’s important to bear in mind that all such strange winds are borne about in the world by people who are made in the image of God. And, as C. S. Lewis wrote, these are immortal souls, for whose lostness we should grieve. We are not inspired, like the apostles, so that we can pronounce with finality against any who are lost. Jesus came to seek and save the lost, and our attitude must be the same (Lk. 19.11).

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 because they perceive the Gospel as a threat to their autonomy and their fun.

But what is it about any of that which can justify our resorting to name-calling, character assassination, gossip, 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 nurture 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?”

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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.” “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? Listen to the anger, the blame-laying and name-calling, and the tribalism that passes for politics, journalism, and higher education in our day. Do these people seem to you to be at peace living contented lives?

Of course not. And the reason is that 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 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, anger, 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. We might pray for our lost friends and neighbors more than we do, or make sure that, when we are with them, we give them a foretaste of the world to come in all our words, deeds, and demeanor.

Let the troubled lives of the lost trouble your soul, so that you groan with longing for them to know the salvation of the Lord.

Grieving and sorrowing for the lost condition of the people around us is good grief, and good grief is an essential component of a well-kept heart. 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 and to grieve for their plight?
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: Whom will you talk with today? At school or work? In the grocery store or at the post office? In your neighborhood? How can you prepare for these conversations so that you make the most of each opportunity for making Jesus known? Let your soul grieve for any lost people you will see, and let the Lord fill your heart with love for them.

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 could 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 sucked the air out of 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. When a child fails to embrace our faith, a friend lets us down in a crucial matter, a colleague secures the promotion we hoped to receive, or a pastor falls into moral sin – such things can disappoint us and plunge us into a season of grieving. At such times our hearts can become “sick” with negative affections ranging from betrayal to slight to hurt, anger, resentment, sadness, and more.

Disappointment and the grief that accompanies it are normal, although the condition 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, as we have seen. 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 an explosion of positive affections 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 a 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 or something pull that rug out from under us, or let 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 to know God in His glory and, knowing Him thus, to 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 because God's

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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. At such times, we need to take our heartsickness to the Lord, so that we might be fully refreshed in Him and in the hope of glory. For 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.

Hope deferred can make your heart sick for a season; but a well-kept heart that hopes in the glory of God and is set on knowing, loving, and serving Him, will not succumb to grief, but will be renewed in the joy of the Lord.

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 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: Think back over a time when you were profoundly disappointed about something, so much so that you entered a period of grieving. How did the hope of glory sustain you at that time? How can you be renewed in that hope whenever disappointment threatens heartsickness?

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, out of her own deep sorrow, rebuked 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. It is the continuation of trials and suffering that can plunge us into deep valleys of sorrow, where despair is a constant temptation.

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.

But we must be careful as we grieve to guard against any vain affections such as self-righteousness, vengefulness, or resentment. Job failed at this point in his grieving, and it took a powerful intervention by God to return him to his senses.

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 pain and 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.

In times of suffering, it may not be our privilege to know why. We must learn to be content in the Lord in every situation, so that even as we sorrow in suffering, we are anchored to the peace and joy only knowing God can bring.

But there is some validity 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, too; 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 *demanded* 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 always know the mind of God in such matters, any more than Job could. But though we may not be able to penetrate the mysteries of the eternal will of God at such times, we can know God and rest in Him, so that we find in Him the comfort, assurance, lovingkindness, and hope that we need in the midst of our trials and suffering. When trials come, we rejoice in the Lord and the hope of glory, even as we

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grieve for the duration of suffering we must endure (Rom. 5.3-5).

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. It may take courage to rejoice in the face of trials, but if we concentrate on fearing and loving God, and giving Him thanks in every situation, hope will prevail, courage will blossom, and we will rejoice in the Lord as we suffer.

When the pain and sorrow of suffering descend upon us, we may certainly expect to grieve for our situation. However, even as we grieve, 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).

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, resentment, or 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 amid our good grief and enfold us with His glory.

Trials and suffering need not lead us into despair. Instead, they may be received as gifts from the Lord, designed to more deeply engage all the affections of our heart and to strengthen our soul for greater service in His Name.

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 during this time to help him receive his sufferings in peace?
3. Meditate on Psalm 22. How can you see rejoicing and thanksgiving amid suffering here? Compare this with Hebrews 12.1, 2. What should we learn from the example of Jesus?

Next steps – Preparation: How can you prepare daily for trials or suffering? What can you do so that, if these should befall, you will be able to bear them up with good grief?

6 The Grief of Separation

*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. In the context, the sons of Korah, who composed this psalm, seem to be grieving the loss of a prominent friend. They put themselves into his experience, so that they express through his thoughts the deep sorrow of separation from life and God. The larger purpose of the psalm will be clear to all who have benefited from the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Here we encounter the grief of the Savior as He sank into His passion, alone, and feeling very far from God.

His is a good grief, because it expresses the depths of His love for the Father, and the power of His longing to be reunited with Him.

Psalm 88 contains many allusions to what Jesus experienced during His suffering on the cross. Jesus was abandoned by His friends (v. 8), the only loved ones He'd ever known. He was forced to endure all the pain and wrath of God against all the sins of the world; and He suffered what the unrepentant will suffer for eternity in hell. His hopes were not dashed, as the writer of Hebrews assures us (Heb. 12.1-3); but His suffering was great. But here the hope and joy set before Jesus as He was dying are not in view.

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 was dying on the cross was the sorrow of separation from His Father. The grief of that 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 deep, 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 pleasures 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. He had lived eternally in joy and rejoicing in the holiness and fellowship of the triune Godhead. 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.

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But the cross changed that. As Jesus hung on the cross, the Father, after a fashion, forsook Him, because the Father is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and Jesus had become all evil in our place, for our redemption. At that moment of separation, Jesus cried out with a great cry of anguish to the Father Who had forsaken Him (Ps. 22.1), so deep was His grief and sorrow.

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.

We don't grieve to be separated from God because, for most of us, it's no big deal. Throughout most of our days, we hardly think about the Lord, even though His thoughts toward us are constant and comprehensive (Ps. 40.5, 17). It doesn't trouble us much that our times of prayer are few and far between, and that the prayers we do manage seem rather perfunctory. The Scriptures describe being separated from God in terms of trouble, anxiousness, sorrow, loneliness, and grief. Think of Peter, weeping at having denied Jesus three times. Think of David, pleading for forgiveness and the return of God's Spirit. Or Jeremiah, weeping and lamenting for an entire nation which had turned its back on the Lord.

Separation from God should provoke pangs of grief in our souls; but that will only be true for us to the extent that we have actually known the joy, wonder, peace, pleasure, majesty, beauty, and mystery of being in His Presence in glory.

The Presence of the Lord

Being separated from God should strike us in the depths of our being as something terrible, fearful, and leading to grief. Such good grief can reinvigorate our soul and strengthen us to seek the Lord earnestly, that our fellowship with Him might be renewed and deepened.

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 we experienced and lived out the hope of glory, and if we knew the love and peace and powerful indwelling Presence of Christ more continuously, then, when we neglect to enjoy the Presence and pleasure of our God, we would know the good grief such separation from our Father brings.

And that good grief will create in our hearts a longing for our Father, and 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? Spend an extended time in prayer, seeking the Presence of the Lord for renewal in His love.

7 Valleys of Weeping

*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. It provides focus and bolstering for tackling 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 can turn our Valleys of Weeping into places of refreshment and renewal, so that we go 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 when suffering and trials, sorrows and grieving overcome us in our path.

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, we’re attaching a version of Psalm 84 set to a familiar hymn tune. We encourage you to learn and sing it frequently, so that whatever may be the grief and sorrow you must 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 ready to be renewed, no matter the grief or sorrow that comes our way in this life.

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, offering ourselves continually to the Lord for His pleasure, whatever we

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encounter along the way, we will be able to tackle and bear, 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 must 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

When our daily walk follows the path of righteousness and uprightness, we can know that, whatever grief we must endure in this life, this path is the one along which we may expect to realize 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 such times each day by focusing on our heavenly King and His eternal glory, singing His praises, seeking Him in prayer, and living in obedience to His Word, come what may. Our true and unshakeable comfort is 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, and overcoming it with renewed hope and joy in the Lord.

The course of our lives must go through valleys of weeping at times; but all sorrow can be good grief if we know how to endure it as children of our heavenly King. Set your mind on the things that are above (Col. 3.1-3). Meditate on the glory that emanates from the face of Jesus (2 Cor. 4.6). Abide in His Presence at all times, and fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore will sustain you through every good grief you must endure on your journey to eternal bliss.

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.

You can download our *Scriptorium* study of Psalm 84 by [clicking here](#). And here is a version for singing, from [The Ailbe Psalter](#):

Psalm 84

(Holy Manna: *Brethren, We Have Met to Worship*)

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.

Blessed are they who never falter as they praise Your grace with song!

Blessed 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.

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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.