

Sorrow May Spend the Night, but Joy Comes in the Morning

Psalm 30

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Anyone who thinks that a life with God does not include sorrow just isn't paying attention—to the Bible, to the Jesus story, or to their own lives. I asked Robert to play that Blind Willie Johnson song (*Lord, Sometimes I Just Can't Keep from Cryin' Sometimes*) to underline that truth. What we find in Psalm 30 is the voice of a poet who has been to the bottom, who has known disappointment with God—and that is *why* his praise now is so meaningful to us.

Don't you just hate those Christians who think that a smiley face is the essence of faith? In their world, faith and denial are kissin' cousins. Keep not just a stiff upper lip but a smile upon your face, and that is being faithful to God. I had a few encounters with well-meaning ladies of that variety in Nashville this week after my father got a diagnosis of terminal cancer. There is something in the sweetness of their voices that says to me, "Let's just act as if it's not serious and we'll all feel better about it."

The most annoying encounters came when I took Dad for a routine visit to the cardiologist to check stitches on a pacemaker he'd had put in ten days before. When we got there, I told the nurse and other present that Dad had been doing fine until a few days before, when they discovered a large tumor spread all inside his abdomen and that he was probably going into hospice care. This did not seem to affect their sense of reality appreciably. One staff member said, "I hope you have a wonderful day." The nurse said, "I hope your problem is resolved before we see you next." The appointment secretary looked at the note saying "one" for the next appointment and asked "Is that one month or one year?" I wanted to say, "Did you glance at the chart? Are any of you listening? Dad is not going to *be* here one year from now!"

I imagine some people feel that way when they come to church. They are dealing with some terrible news or a great fear, and we are singing "Praise to the Lord the Almighty" as if everything is under control. Psalm 30 is a voice calling for a realistic faith, a faith that lives in the real world of sickness and surprise, where great sorrow can come upon us suddenly. We can live with those experiences and still trust God, the poet says. I don't trust God because nothing bad ever happens to me; I trust God *because* bad things have happened to me and God got me through them.

Are the ones who praise God the ones who have had it easy? *Au contraire, mon frere*. You know that the ones who skate through life on the surface with no experience of the void that lies just beneath the ice are almost never people who have any appreciation for God as anything other than a decoration. Those who come to know God are those who have fallen in, those who almost drowned, those whose body temps got so low they thought the life was gone out of them. When they come back to life, that's when they praise God—because they have begun to know God as their savior.

The psalmist in Psalm 30 says that once he was living in prosperity. Everything was going well for him, and he said "I shall not be moved." He thought that God had made him like a strong mountain which nothing could move. His prosperity was

permanent. But even though he attributed his easy life to God, it did not last. The psalmist says abruptly, “You hid your face; I was dismayed.” All of a sudden the good life came to an end: the markets crashed, his business failed, her marriage fell apart, they lost a child. Whatever it was, it felt like God was turning away from him, and he was disappointed with God.

Judging from the first two verses of the psalm, the crisis may have been a health crisis. The psalmist says that God healed him after he had been close to dying. I am acutely aware at the moment how suddenly everything can change. Most of you have met my father, who until two weeks ago was the healthiest 93-year-old you ever met. He went swimming every morning, he drove himself and lived alone, he tutored almost daily at a public school, he taught English as a second language, he taught adult Sunday School, he led the twice-a-month hymn sings for his retirement community. He was on Facebook every day and kept in touch by email with many Japanese pastors in Japanese. Last February he flew out to LA to give the keynote address to a Japanese pastors’ conference.

But that was then, this is now. Thursday night just over two weeks ago, Dad had abdominal pain sharp enough to call my brother to take him to the ER. He thought maybe it was a kidney stone. They did a CT scan and immediately came back and said the mass in his abdomen was so large and widespread that he should just go home under hospice care and get ready for the end. After I got there, we sought the opinion of Dad’s long-time primary care physician and a hospital he was more comfortable in, with other tests and a biopsy and a consult by an oncologist. But the result was the same: the best choice is to do nothing but keep him comfortable and prepare for death.

Of course, it may not seem like a big surprise when a 93-year-old dies, but for us it was as unexpected as the crisis faced by the psalmist. One day I thought “I shall not be moved,” and the next day God was letting me die.

But the testimony in this psalm is that in this case God did not let the psalmist die. The poet says that he cried out to God. It was not so much a kind of bargaining as trying to make God see the logic of saving his life. “If I die, what good does that do for you? If I am dust, I can’t praise you or tell the world that you are a faithful God. Save me for the sake of your own reputation. And here is the bargain: if you save my life, I *will* praise you.”

That brings us to the beginning of the psalm: I lift you up because you lifted me up. I exalt you, Yahweh, because you drew me up out of the Pit. I was for all practical purposes a dead man, but you restored me to life. You lifted me out of the Abyss, the Void.

Here is what I learned, the psalmist says: this is my testimony: God’s anger is just for a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime. Weeping may come into your life like an unwelcome guest; I like the translation “Sorrow may spend the night” (Holman Christian Standard Bible). There’s no avoiding that. Sorrow may spend the night—but—joy comes in the morning.

That’s true whether there is a healing or not. That’s true in life and in death. Either way there is a morning with joy. If my father dies, there will still be a morning with joy. If your disease is healed or if it progresses, there will be joy in the morning. Whether you get a job or lose a job, sorrow may spend the night, but joy will still be knocking for admittance the next morning if you let him in.

As Christians, when we hear of joy in the morning we think of that morning when Christ was raised from the dead, and we think of “that bright eternal morning when the dead in Christ are raised.” We know that our lives are mostly lived out on Friday afternoon when a voice cried out from the cross and the skies darkened, but we live in confidence that Sunday is coming. Whenever we find ourselves in the night and we look over and see sadness sleeping on the other side of the bed, we can say to ourselves, “At least he doesn’t *live* here; he’s gotta go in the morning.” There are nights we just have to get through, but joy comes with the morning light. The pain I have right now is not forever. Tragedy is not the last word.

One of the sayings John records Jesus saying to his disciples just before he goes to be arrested is, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart: I have overcome the world.” I’m inclined to think that this is a saying of the resurrected Jesus remembered by John and placed earlier in the story. It was in the cross and resurrection that Jesus overcame the world—all the forces of evil opposed to the kingdom of God. It was in the cross and resurrection that Jesus overcame the power of sin to control us and the power of death to put an end to our existence. “I am the resurrection,” he said, “and I am the life.”

Your testimony may be that God rescued you from sickness or from a life of sin or meaningless or hopelessness. Whether your testimony is of a one-time miraculous event or the perpetual miracle of God lifting you up to himself, the result is the same. The outer expression of it is praise, and the inner manifestation is joy. Verse 11 may be one of the most beautiful in the Psalms:

You have turned my mourning into dancing;

You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy (NRSV).

Once my life was consumed by death and loss, but you gave me a life driven by joy and celebration. You took off my funeral clothes and gave me party clothes.

I like the way *The Message* renders it:

You did it: you changed wild lament into whirling dance;

You ripped off my black mourning band and decked me with wildflowers.

I’m about to burst with song; I can’t keep quiet about you.

God, my God, I can’t thank you enough.

This table reminds us that we do not have a smiley face God who knows nothing about our sorrow. We do not have a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our weakness, but one who was tested in every way that we are. As the hymn says,

He took my sins and my sorrows, he made them his very own.

He bore the burden to Calv’ry and suffered and died alone.

We have been saved by the God who became one of us and sweat drops of blood before going to the cross because it was a struggle for him to do what he needed to do. He knows what it’s like to ask for death to pass you by. But he also knows what it is to let love have its way, and he knows what it is to be confident even as you enter that dark night that joy comes in the morning. As we share his life by faith, may we share his hope and joy.