

Beautiful and Terrible Things

A Christian Struggle
with Suffering, Grief, and Hope

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INTRODUCTION



MY GOD

I had forgotten that it was New Year's Eve. I called the president of our university, the man who had hired me and become my mentor, to tell him that our son Mack was being taken by helicopter to Hershey Medical Center. I asked if I could have the number of the dean of the School of Medicine to ask him for any assistance. When the dean answered the phone, I could hear the party in the background.

Elizabeth and I drove the two and half hours south from State College to Hershey, not knowing that Mack had already died on the helicopter, almost before we had left town. We found out the next morning that it was sepsis, a fast-moving blood infection that has a 50 percent mortality rate if properly diagnosed within an hour or two of onset, over 90 percent if not caught immediately. It presents itself like the flu—in Mack's case, the same flulike symptoms that his buddy had two days before. Within thirty-six hours of waking up with a fever, our little boy, my buddy, was gone.

When we arrived at the hospital, we were escorted to the ironically named “quiet room” and told the chaplain

would be with us soon. I knew what that meant, and I told my wife. I won't pretend to remember the details and order of events; it remains an emotional, swirling vortex of trauma in my mind and body even seven years later. Self-consciously, I admit that when we heard that Mack had died, the very first thing that came to my mind was to scream out,

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words
of my groaning?

I swallowed the words. I kept them inside me because it seemed melodramatic, too sanctimonious, to utter them aloud. But they came unbidden—and can you really be “melodramatic” standing by the body of your child? Silently, in my mind, the words continued to run again and again through my head as we stood next to his lifeless form.

How could God turn his back to us? How could it be that Mack was gone, our prayers ignored? We had prayed with Mack as they put him on the gurney to take him on his first and last ride in a helicopter. As it took off, we looked up from the parking lot, and I wept as I prayed, “Lord! Protect my child!” In that room, I wanted to wail, and I wept. At times I continue to wail, and I suppose these words are an extension or a continuation of that wailing. Even now, years later, every day we cry some, and some days we cry a lot.

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

These opening verses of Psalm 22 are a lament of one surrounded, literally or metaphorically, by enemies, but the emotion they contain, the despair, is felt by any who grieve. Yet every time I find myself invoking this psalm, part of my mind immediately chastises me, saying, “Who are you to

invoke the words of Christ?" I am a person in pain, grieving, that is who. These were Jesus' words, but first they were the words of the psalmist. Jesus appropriated them, and so can we.

A few years after his son Eric died, Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff published a collection of essays and reflections called *Lament for a Son*.¹ I have often noted the lack of an article. He does not offer "a lament" or "the lament" for a son. He implores us to "lament for a son" — his son. This is *my* lament for *my* son.

Lament is, at its heart, personal. Even when we lament as a community, we each bring our own voice to the chorus. This work is also then, out of necessity, a reflection on my own life. I grew up in the church being taught from the earliest age the Scriptures that would eventually form the foundation of my faith as well as the basis of my academic discipline. And in that horrible moment when we stood over Mack's beautiful, lifeless body, it was Scripture that came to mind: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

CHAPTER 1



LETTING IT OUT

In the hospital, in the hours after our son had died, I restrained myself and refrained from crying out. Yet in my head the noise was deafening. “How! How could you let this happen? How could he be gone? Gone. Here but not. Present but forever absent. Gone.” But we held each other, my wife and I, and we cried over Mack’s little body. We remained quiet, in shock, stoic.

Everyone reacts to death differently and grieves differently. I learned that when I was barely a teenager. When my grandfather died it was noted by the family that, even though we were all very close, I did not cry. His daughters and wife each responded in various ways. None better or worse than the other except in the eyes of those who felt hurt that the other was not showing enough respect, or love, or decorum. This added hurt to grief that continues to this day, over thirty years later. In grief, some will cry, some will wail, some will sit still silently. An important truth to establish at the outset of this book is that we need to leave ourselves and others room to grieve, to grieve without judgment of ourselves or others.

Yet oddly enough, many Christians are told that they should *not* grieve. Sadness is selfish, some say, since your child/wife/friend is whole and safe with God. Let your mourning turn into dancing! To grieve is to lack faith in the resurrection! Do you really believe? Then you will be happy for those who “sleep in the Lord”!

Less than two weeks after Mack died, I posted a brief essay on my blog about whether Mack’s death was God’s will, a topic I will turn to shortly. One commenter on my blog challenged me. “You should ask yourself: where is your child better off? In heaven now or alive and suffering in the many situations that bring pain and suffering to him? If you say the latter then I would say you are being selfish in your thinking.”¹ Many readers came to my defense, but I was not surprised or hurt by this person’s comment. I understood that it came from a well-intended (if curt) effort to encourage me to focus on the promise of the resurrection that we have in Jesus. I was equipped to respond to such comments, since it was a subject I had already thought long and hard about, yet I have since spoken to many grieving parents who have received the same message from their church communities. This sort of misplaced “faith” devastated them, precisely when they most needed spiritual support.

As is so often the case, such well-meaning but misguided sentiments come from a misreading of Scripture, in this case 1 Thessalonians 4:13. Paul is encouraging the believers at Thessalonica and helping them to place their grief in the context of their new faith: “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.”

Paul is not telling them that they should *not* grieve; rather, he is encouraging all those who believe in Christ that their grief not need be as those “who have no hope.”² We *will* grieve; that is a given and should not be rushed past or diminished. Our knowledge of the resurrection,

our faith that the kingdom of God will be established and that we will be reunited with God and our loved ones, does not remove our feelings of loss and sorrow *now*. Those who try to rush past this time of lamentation are robbing themselves and others of the necessary expression of grief. Furthermore, we are encouraged by the Word of God, both Scripture and the Word made flesh, to lament, to cry out, and even to express our anger.

Grief, it must be noted, does not only come with the death of a loved one; we grieve all sorts of things in our life. Often, however, we do not realize or acknowledge that our response to the loss of these things, such as the breakdown of a marriage or a change in career, is actually grief. Under my photo in my high school yearbook is the statement “MD or bust!” When I entered high school I was determined to become a research physician. When I introduced myself to others during freshman orientation at college, I would offer the usual orientation greeting: hometown, major, and extracurricular: “I am from DC; I am a chemistry major, pre-med; and I am on the swim team.” It was my identity, expressed in strong “I am” statements. I “was” those things. By the time Thanksgiving break arrived, however, I had quit the swim team and was no longer a chemistry major; visions of medical school and the white lab coat had evaporated. What followed were several years of depression and confusion as I stumbled along, trying to figure out who I was going to be and what I was going to do. I know now that I was grieving, grieving the loss of my identity as a swimmer and budding physician. There is much that could be said about not placing one’s identity and self-worth in such external things as a career and activities, but for this discussion it is important to note that my grief was real, and it needed to be treated as such. That possible future I had envisioned was gone, and I needed the time and space to reflect and acknowledge the new life that lay before me.

There is a wonderful little volume called *Good Grief* by Granger Westberg. Originally a chapter within a larger work reflecting on Westberg's time in ministry as a Lutheran pastor on the faculty of the University of Illinois Medical School, *Good Grief* is now past its fiftieth year and remains a thoughtful and empowering guide to grieving and caring for those who grieve. I was given this book by a friend, my spiritual director and former pastor, when Mack died. It was there that I first came across the observation that in 1 Thessalonians Paul is not telling us that we should not grieve, but rather that we should grieve in a way different from those who do not know the hope of the resurrection.

It was also in that little book that I realized how many different things we grieve. "A list of losses would be inexhaustible," says Westberg. "We can lose our health, our eyesight, our hearing. . . . In some families grief comes with the loss of a pet which has been a part of everything that has gone on in that household for ten years or more. . . . To say a person is deeply religious and therefore does not have to face grief situations is ridiculous. Not only is it unrealistic, but it is also incompatible with the whole Christian message."⁵ There are so many things in life that we will grieve, that we ought to grieve, not least the very nature of our world, as we shall see in the next chapter. The message of Scripture is that God is redeeming us *and* the world. It is an ongoing process and requires our full participation with God, experiencing the sorrows and suffering of this world as well as the joy, love, and comfort found in the grace of God.

Honest to God

Not long ago, a friend wrote to let me know that he and his wife were filing for divorce. They are kind and loving parents and had been very thoughtful and careful about making their decision. He concluded by writing, "I feel it would

be an appropriate time to reread Job, but I don't want to wallow, only to grieve and rebuild my own self step-by-step." My friend understands that he has embarked on a long process, a grieving process, and that the book of Job is a good place to begin reflection.

Job is often the first biblical book people turn to when they experience some loss or catastrophe in their lives. It is understandable, as it opens with Job losing just about everything in his life in a short span of time. His children and their families are killed, his massive flocks and herds are killed or stolen, and his body is overcome by painful and debilitating sores. Famously, Job's friends come to offer him comfort and support by challenging him repeatedly to simply admit his guilt, for he must have sinned in *some* way (and it could not be in any small way either, given the results), and accept God's punishment. Job, however, knows that he has done nothing to deserve this treatment and remains firm in his statement of innocence and demand for God to speak to him, to explain his suffering. He stands for all of us who have felt the world collapse on us for no discernible reason.

The audience knows the explanation for his suffering because we have the preface (Job 1:6–12) in which God and "the Adversary," *basatan*, place a bet on whether or not Job will remain faithful to God in the face of such incredible hardship.⁴ Scholars debate the dating and structure endlessly, but it is perhaps best to understand the work as an effort to think through the problem of suffering and our usual responses to it.⁵ For this "thought experiment" to work, the audience needs to know that Job is in no way deserving of his fate, and the preface provides that certainty to us, a certainty that Job possessed but his friends knew nothing about. Job is also presented as a kind of "everyman." He is not an Israelite or member of any other tribe that we know of, he is not a patriarch or hero of the Israelite tradition, and he is from the "land of Uz," which cannot be located with any certainty. Job is someone who

can represent any one of us in any place or time, experiencing the vicissitudes of life.

As the book of Job cycles through the friends' exhortations, Job himself remains resolute; he is innocent. Yet he is not silent: "Therefore I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul" (Job 7:11). His friends would have him confess and repent, but Job insists on being honest with God. We will return to these disputes later; it is the honesty and integrity of Job that is important to note here. Confronted with crippling loss and illness, Job will not keep quiet; he speaks and insists that God take note of his plight, to see his situation and deliver him. This is not the action of an arrogant or prideful man but of a faithful person. It is a holy and healthy part of grief (that we seem to have forgotten) to express to God our sadness, our anger, and our bitterness. When we are in the midst of our anguish, there is no greater statement of faith than to express that despair honestly: "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Yet far too often we are told that it is never right to be angry at God.⁶ We are told we must have "an attitude of gratitude" and praise God for all that we have, even the hardship, because "suffering produces endurance." Frequently devotional books and sermons are like Job's friends, adjuring us to consider the weight of our sins and the justice of God's punishment without taking into account the suffering that is not punishment, the anguish that comes from unjust hardship. Job addresses that anguish, provides us with an example to follow, and gives us the permission to say to God, "Do not condemn me! Let me know why you contend against me" (Job 10:2).

It is not that Job's friends, or the sermons and devotional books of today, are not in some way right. In fact, that is the very point of the poetic dialogues in the book of Job: they represent the usual biblical response to suffering, primarily that suffering is often the consequence of sin or God's loving reproof. Our lived experience, however, testifies that

often we experience loss and tragedy for which we bear no responsibility. Mack's death was not deserved in any way. Neither he nor we, his parents, sinned such that death would be the appropriate penalty, not in God's law or in our limited human justice. So Job is an exemplar for us. He knows he is innocent; we know he is innocent; and sometimes *we know we are innocent*. In the face of this reality, the platitudes and calls to repentance ring hollow and, far from bringing comfort, only exacerbate the wounds. "Your maxims are proverbs of ashes," says Job (13:12). They provide no sustenance or nourishment, only bitterness.

It is vital that we are honest with God and ourselves, especially during times of great struggle and pain. That honesty requires us to bring all of our emotions to our divine relationship, letting it all out, our praise *and* our pain. This is why a majority of the psalms are psalms of lament. They are honest expressions of grief and models of prayer. It is not surprising that in his darkest and deepest moment Jesus invoked a psalm of lament to express his anguish, pain, and fear. We often are reminded that Jesus was "without sin" while forgetting that he was also human, like us, and "in every respect has been tested as we are" (Heb. 4:15). In his human experience Jesus wept. Jesus cried out to God. He grieved.

Jesus Wept—So Can We

Jesus grieved for his friend Lazarus, for the world, for himself. Even knowing the great value and gift of the sacrifice he was offering, even knowing that he would be raised from the dead just three days later, even knowing all this Jesus asked God, if possible, that he might be spared the suffering. Finally, in his last moments, he cried out in lament, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" If Jesus can challenge God, if Jesus can weep and grieve and ask God to spare him the pain and hardship, then so can we. So should we.

Jesus' cry, quoting the first words of Psalm 22, is perhaps one of the most challenging passages in the Bible (see Matt. 27 and Mark 15). Not only is the entire scene gut-wrenching—with Jesus beaten, stripped, and hanging from the cross while his mother and friends stand beneath him watching his anguish in anguish of their own—but this great cry of despair should penetrate our very souls. We see and cannot comprehend the physical suffering, and then we question even the theology of it. How is it that God could have forsaken himself? How could he forsake his Son?

The short answer is that God did not and would not. Just as we are human, Jesus was fully human and, in his humanity, experienced both the physical and spiritual horrors of this moment. Jerry Irish, reflecting on the death of his own young son and looking to the Gospels, finds Jesus just as frightened and appalled as we are by death. He grieves the death of others and even his own. Obedient though Jesus is, Irish writes, “the Gospel writers picture Jesus preparing for death as something dreadful. In Gethsemane, Jesus asks his closest disciples to be with him in his time of sorrow and trouble. ‘Horror and dismay came over him.’ Jesus said to his disciples, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death’ (Mark 14:34).”⁷ Even for the savior of the world, death is grievous, and Jesus expressed his full range of emotions toward God.

Jesus poured out his grief on the Mount of Olives shortly before he was betrayed:

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” (Luke 22:39–42)

In his prayer Jesus gives us permission to ask God to spare us the difficult times. We are not called to be stoic soldiers, silently accepting whatever hardship comes upon us. We are allowed to ask for mercy, to be spared the suffering. Jesus utters this imperative to his disciples twice in this one passage, and it is, of course, the same prayer that we utter in the Lord's Prayer: "Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil." So we too are allowed to ask God to spare us trials, tests, and difficult times, just as we are allowed to confront God with our grief and demand that he respond: "O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer!"

If Jesus teaches us this, then I think it is safe to conclude that we are not being "spiritual wimps" when we pray for God's grace to ease our lives. A vital element of such prayer is our faith and willingness to accept such trials if God so desires, but we must be authentic with God even, and especially, in our darkest and deepest moments of fear and doubt.

Jesus' appeal to God on the cross is not, as it may seem, a cry of doubt or uncertainty, asking why God had abandoned him; rather, Jesus is invoking the entirety of the psalm, a psalm that is both a cry of lament *and* a confession of faith in God.⁸ In Psalm 22, the psalmist calls out to God, demanding that God hear his cries of suffering and see the pain and hardship that he is enduring for the sake of his faithfulness, but it moves on in later verses to affirm the author's faith in God and confidence that God will save. Most of the psalms are just such laments, illustrating the importance of expressing our emotions fully and directly to God, not remaining in any one condition too long, but not holding back either.

Faith-Filled Lament

These psalms often begin with a "calling out" of God, a demand that God listen or a statement that God has rejected his people.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words
of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

— Ps. 22:1–2

Such language is jarring and often causes Christian readers to feel that the psalmist is impertinent if not heretical. Who are we to challenge God? And yet far from being blasphemous or a sign of faithlessness, it shows the depth of confidence that the psalmist has in God that the psalmist can call to the Lord and get a response. This is also the message of the book of Job. Job called on God and declared his innocence, and God responded. What the book of Job and the psalms of lament teach us, which we have often forgotten, is that we can and indeed must be sincere and honest with God. Our prayers should not be filled with platitudes and flowery language but should express our deepest needs and concerns, even our complaints against God. We are allowed to be angry with God, bitter and saddened by our life experience.⁹ In so doing, we are giving our all to God, even our anger, disappointment, and doubt.

When Jesus invokes this powerful psalm, he continues to show his faithfulness to God and his confidence in God's faithfulness to him. Within the heart of this psalm is an assertion:

Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

— Ps. 22:3–5

By invoking this psalm, Jesus declares that he knows it is God who will deliver him, the very God who has cared for him since birth and has guided his life. The psalm concludes with the confident assertion that God is ruler of all and will deliver the psalmist and his people:

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.

Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

—Ps 22:27–31

This is the declaration of Jesus on the cross. It is not an expression of doubt as to whether God is still with him, but an acknowledgment that God is *always* present, even when it feels he is far from us and ignoring our pleas. It is an honest plea to God to see that Jesus is suffering and a confession that only God can save him. The same God who rescued Jesus' ancestors and has been his God since his mother bore him will deliver him and even all those who have gone down to the dust. It is a confession of faith in God even as it is an expression of grief.

This is the example that Jesus provided in his last moments, in his darkest moments. So how do *we* lament? How can we be honest with ourselves and God while confessing our need for his saving grace? When we look at

the psalms of complaint or lament, we find that they often have the same basic elements. Consider Psalm 13: There is an address or cry to God (“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?” v. 1a) followed by a lament or complaint (“How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” v. 2). There follows a confession of trust (“But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation,” v. 5) with an invocation calling God to action (“Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!” v. 3a). The psalm concludes with a vow to praise God (“I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me,” v. 6).

What we find is not just a literary device, but a healthy model for our own journey through grief: cry to God, lament, confess our faith, call God to action, and praise God. The psalms themselves show great variety in language and form, so we do not need to be bound to this structure, but the elements provide guidance and, for those who need it, permission to express our suffering and loss.

Our response to hardship and grief does not need to be pious silence; outrage and anger are acceptable! God is big enough and can handle our frustration and bitterness. Most importantly of all, God wants our honesty, so that we can be honest with ourselves. God wants us to share all of our selves, including our pain, and God wants to be present with us *in* our suffering, *through* our suffering.

*Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first
he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may
find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus
Christ our Lord. Amen.*¹⁰

Reflection Questions

1. Read a few psalms of lament, such as Psalms 3, 13, 17, 57, and 86. Create your own lament, following the model: cry to God, lament, confess our faith, call God to action, and praise God.
2. How do you normally grieve and respond to death? How do you respond to death differently from people you know well?
3. What message do you think your faith community conveys to those who grieve? What do you think it means to grieve as those who have hope?
4. Think of a time when you grieved not because someone had died but because you had lost something, such as a job or dream or relationship. How is that grief similar to and different from grieving a death?
5. How do you feel when you consider that Jesus cried out to God or grieved the death of his friend Lazarus?

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