

# Weeping<sup>1</sup>

## Is it OK to lament?

How do you feel when you are in the middle of trouble? How *should* you feel?

It seems as if in our modern society/church, it is no longer acceptable for a believer to truly “lament.” Keller suggests that the Reformation frowned on the expression of doubts or complaints. Christians were (are?) taught not to weep or cry but to show God their faith through unflinching, joyful acceptance of his will. Do you believe you are failing to show faith when you feel down, when you feel as if God is millions of miles away?

Yet the Bible is full of people expressing their grief and distress. A large number of the Psalms contain expressions of the psalmist’s grief, discouragement, brokenness, and feelings of abandonment. This is particularly evident in the “Psalms of Lament.” (Cp. Individual lament: Ps. 3, 13, 22, 57, 139; corporate: Ps 12, 44, 74, 80; esp. Ps 88). The Lamentations of Jeremiah also express the deep grief of the prophet.

Job did not show a lot of “super faith” when he encountered deep affliction. When he got the news of his personal catastrophe, he got up, he tore his clothes and fell in the dirt (1:20). Job does not show stoic patience. Yet the Bible asserts that in all of this he did not sin. By the middle of the book, Job is cursing the day he was born and comes close to charging God with injustice with his angry questions. Job’s grief was expressed with powerful emotion and soaring rhetoric. He did not “make nice” with God, praying politely. He was brutally honest about his feelings. Yet God is apparently undisturbed by all this and at the end of the book commends Job (42:7-9), requiring Job’s intercessory prayers for his friends!

## A Bruised Reed He Will Not Break

When we comfort those facing deep trouble we cannot simply tell them to “pull themselves together.” We need to learn to be patient and gentle with them and with ourselves when we face grief and pain. We should not assume that if we are trusting in God we won’t weep, or feel anger or feel hopeless.

Isaiah 42:3 states about the Suffering servant, “a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out until in faithfulness he brings forth justice.” The Hebrew term for “bruised” does not describe a light injury, but rather a deep contusion that destroys a vital internal organ—in other words, a deathblow. Applied to a person, this is an injury that may not show on the surface, but that is nevertheless fatal. When a stalk of grain is “bruised” it will not produce fruit. Yet the Suffering Servant does what no one else can do: he heals it so that it produces grain again.

Jesus is the Suffering Servant who cares for bruised people. Jesus is attracted to hopeless cases. He cares for the fragile, the ones who are dying on the inside even though it may not show externally. Jesus sees all the way to the heart and he knows what to do. He binds the brokenhearted and heals our wounds (Ps. 147:3; Is. 61:1)

The story of Elijah (1 Kings 18-19) is an excellent case study of how bruised reeds are restored and placed back into service. The weight and challenge of ministry had drained Elijah of physical, emotional and spiritual strength. He may have been a great prophet, but he was also human and could take only so much disappointment, opposition and difficulty. He is despondent, runs from his enemies, is suicidal and doesn’t expect to be of any further service to God. A perfect example of a despondent, bruised person. His candle is flickering, ready to go out. He is not handling suffering and stress all that well!

How does God treat him? He sends an angel. The angel does not challenge him or ask him probing questions (although God does later). The angel feeds him, touches him, lets him sleep and protects him. True, God challenges him later and calls him back to ministry. God knew and provided what the bruised Elijah needed: rest and food, touch and gentleness. God shows us here that we are complex creatures—with bodies and souls. To oversimplify treatment would be to break the bruised reed—to put out the smoldering wick. God does not do that. At the right time, a despondent person may

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<sup>1</sup> Material taken/quoted from Tim Keller, *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, chapter 12.

need a confrontation, to be challenged. But she also may need a walk by the sea and a great meal. Isaiah 42 teaches that Jesus is gentle with the bruised and never mistreats them. The point is this—suffering people need to be able to weep and pour out their hearts, and not to immediately be shut down by being told what to do. Nor should we do that to ourselves if we are grieving.

## Weeping in the Dark

Is there a place provided for lamentation in the church? Do we give sufferers the freedom to weep and cry out, “Where are you, Lord? Why are you not helping me?” (How about the Pentecostal tradition? What about “praying through,” “weeping at the altar?”) We can learn a lot about weeping in the darkness from Psalm 88. This psalm and one other, 39, are famous because they do not end on a positive note. The last verse of Ps 88 says, “darkness is my closest friend” (and by way of implication, you’re not, God!) What we can learn from Heman’s (the author of this psalm) dark experience?

1. **Believers can stay in darkness for a long time.** It is possible to pray and pray and endure and things not really get any better. There is no ray of hope at the end of this psalm. It shows us that the believer may live right and still remain in darkness. The darkness may be external circumstances or an inner spiritual state of pain. Things don’t have to quickly work themselves out, nor does it always become clear why this or that happened. One commentator wrote, “Whoever devises from the scriptures a philosophy in which everything turns out right has to begin by tearing this page out of the volume.”
2. **Times of darkness—while they continue—can reveal God’s grace in new depths.** Heman is angry; he is essentially cross-examining God saying, “I *want* to praise you. I *want* to declare your goodness.” But in the end he is virtually saying, “You’re not there for me God!” He does not control his temper or speak reverently to God. Yet commentator Kidner says that the presence of such prayers in Scripture is a witness to God’s understanding. God knows how people speak when they are desperate. God hasn’t “censored” prayers like this from His Word. God does not say, “Real believers don’t pray like this.” God understands. God remains this man’s God not because he puts on a happy face and controls all his emotions, but because of His grace. He is present with us in all our mixed motives.
3. Perhaps when we are still **in unrelenting darkness that we have the greatest opportunity to defeat the forces of evil.** In the darkness we have a choice that is not really there in better times. We choose to serve God just because He is God. At moments like these we feel as if we are not getting anything from God, yet we continue to pray to and trust in Him. We are finally learning to love God for Himself, not for His benefits.

## The Darkness of Jesus

How can I know that God is still present and filled with goodwill toward me even when I sense nothing but darkness? Even though we may experience great darkness in our lives and feel like Heman or the author of the other “hopeless psalm”, Psalm 39, the darkness we experience can never compare to the darkness Jesus experienced on the cross. Heman wrote many more psalms that have bless millions.

The author of Ps 39 felt as if God had turned his face from him (v. 13). But the only person who sought God and truly *did* lose God’s face and truly *did* experience total darkness—was Jesus (Matt. 27:45-46). It was Jesus who truly experienced the ultimate darkness—the cosmic rejection we deserved—so that we can know the Lord will never leave or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). Because he was truly abandoned by God, we only *seem* to be or *feel* to be abandoned by him. Jesus suffered for us. He did not abandon us but provided a way for us by means of his suffering. Do you think he will abandon you now in the midst of yours? Michael Wilcock imagines Jesus saying: “This can happen to a believer. It does not mean you are lost. This can happen to someone who does not deserve it [after all, it happened to me!]. It doesn’t mean you have strayed. It can happen at any time, as long as this world last; only in the next will such things be done away. And it can happen without your knowing why. There are answers, there is a purpose, and one day you will know.”

## Grieving and Rejoicing

So what does it mean to rejoice in suffering? It should be clear that we should not understand this in subjective, emotional terms. It doesn’t mean “have happy emotions.” Nor can it mean that Christians are simply to keep a stiff upper lip and defiantly say, “I won’t let this defeat me.” It is unrealistic to act as if you have strength when you don’t.

Suffering creates inner sorrow, it *does* make you weak. Denying your hurt now means you may pay the price later by blowing up, breaking down or falling apart suddenly.

1 Peter 1:6-7 states “you greatly rejoice” in your salvation though now “you have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” The word for suffer, *lupeo*, means “severe mental or emotional distress.” It is the word used of Jesus in Gethsemane. Both statements are in the present tense: they are rejoicing and suffering at the same time! Not only can we do both at the same time, we *must* do both if we are to grow through our suffering rather than be wrecked by it.

Our emotions are not holy, sovereign things. You can’t force your feelings; you must not deny or try to create feelings. But we must remember that in the Bible, “heart” is not the same as emotions. The heart is the place of your deepest commitments, trusts, and hopes. Our emotions flow from those commitments. To “rejoice” in God means to dwell on and remind ourselves of who God is, who we are, and what he has done for us. Sometimes our emotions respond and follow, sometimes they do not. Rejoicing is not something that precludes feelings of grief, or doubt, weakness, and pain. Rejoicing in suffering happens *within* sorrow.

How does it work? Grief and sorrow drive you more into God. In the same way as the thermostat in air conditioner kicks in when the temperature climbs, so, grief and sorrow drive you more into God and show you the resources you never had. Feel the grief—look at Jesus. He was known as the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Yet he was perfect. Because he was not all absorbed in himself, he could feel the sadness of the world. The weeping drives you into the joy, it enhances the joy, and then the joy enables you to actually feel your grief without its sinking you. In other words, you are finally emotionally healthy! Rather than expecting God to remove the sorrow and replace it with happiness, we should look for a “glory”—a taste and conviction and increasing sense of God’s presence—that helps us rise above the darkness.