

TWELVE

Weeping

*I live to show his power, who once did bring
My joys to weep, and now my griefs to sing.*

George Herbert, "Joseph's Coat"

If we understand the more general principles, it is now safe to treat each of the individual ways or strategies that the Bible lays out for walking through suffering. None of them is sufficient in itself, nor should we interpret them as a series of discrete "steps" that can be followed like a recipe. They overlap and inter-penetrate one another. And, depending on causes and temperaments and other factors, they will be followed in different ways.

The Disappearance of Lament

Ronald Rittgers's magisterial book *The Reformation of Suffering* traces how Luther and the German Reformers sought to recover a more biblical approach to suffering. They believed that the medieval church, with its assumption that patience under suffering could merit salvation, had fallen into a new, paganlike stoicism. Lutherans argued forcefully that Jesus bore all our punishment for sin. Therefore we do not need to earn Christ's help and attention but can be assured that he is lovingly present with us in our affliction.

But, Rittgers argues, the Lutheran church nevertheless seemed to

[240]

Weeping

follow the medieval church in one respect—by ignoring the significant biblical witness of "lament" as a valid response to troubles and misery. A great number of the psalms are called "Psalms of Lament." They are poignant cries of distress and grief. Often the psalmist is complaining about the actions of others, or is even troubled by his own thoughts and actions. But some of the Psalms are expressions of frustration with God himself.³⁴⁴ Psalm 44:23 reads "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?" and Psalm 89:49 says "Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?" Of course, the book of Job is filled with cries of lament, as are some of the prophetic utterances of Jeremiah. Jeremiah even likens God to a watercourse that looks permanent but runs dry. "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?" cries the prophet to the Lord. "You are to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails" (Jer 15:18).

Rittgers says that the Lutherans, in their concern that Christians not doubt the love of Christ, minimized the legitimacy of lament. He argues that the early Reformers created a culture in which the expression of doubts or complaints was frowned upon. Christians were taught not to weep or cry but to show God their faith through unflinching, joyful acceptance of his will. Rittgers cites early Lutheran authors who were embarrassed that the book of Job was even in the Bible, since questioning God—as Job did—was a terrible sin. One theologian explained the book's inclusion by saying that God wanted to show us he could still forgive and have mercy on someone with faith as weak as Job's.³⁴⁵

This certainly is partly true. Job did not exercise his faith as he should have, and in the final chapter he admits as much, saying to God, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5–6). Nevertheless, the assertion that Job's outbursts, cries, and laments were completely illegitimate does not square with the biblical text.

In the first chapter, for example, when Job first gets all the bad news about the deaths of his children and the loss of his estate, we are told that "Job got up and tore his robe" and then he "fell to the ground" (Job 1:20), but then the author adds, "In all this Job sinned not" (Job 1:22). Here is a man already behaving in a way that many pious Chris-

[241]

tians would consider at least unseemly or showing a lack of faith. He rips his clothes, falls to the ground, cries out. He does not show any stoical patience. But the biblical text says, "In all this Job sinned not." By the middle of the book, Job is cursing the day he is born and comes very close to charging God with injustice in his angry questions. And yet God's final verdict on Job is surprisingly positive. At the end of the book, God turns to Eliphaz, the first of Job's friends, and says:

"I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has." So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite did what the Lord told them; and the Lord accepted Job's prayer (Job 42:7-9).

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. And while God did—as we will see later—forcefully call Job to acknowledge his unfathomable wisdom and majesty, nevertheless God ultimately vindicated him.

A Bruised Reed He Will Not Break

It is not right, therefore, for us to simply say to a person in grief and sorrow that they need to pull themselves together. We should be more gentle and patient with them. And that means we should also be gentle and patient with ourselves. We should not assume that if we are trusting in God we won't weep, or feel anger, or feel hopeless.

Isaiah 42 describes the mysterious Suffering Servant who, Isaiah 53 reveals, will have the guilt of our transgressions put upon him so that,

by his suffering, our condemnation will be taken away. In Isaiah 42:3, it says about the Servant that "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 word translated as "bruise" does not mean a minor injury. It denotes a deep contusion that destroys a vital internal organ—in other words, a deathblow. If applied to a person, it means an injury that doesn't show on the surface but that is nonetheless fatal. When it refers to a bruised reed, it means a stalk of grain that has been broken at an angle, not into two pieces. But because it has been thus broken, it is never going to produce grain. And yet this servant does what no one else can do. He can heal it so it produces grain again.

Who is this Servant? The Christian church has since its very beginning understood this to be Jesus Christ himself (Acts 8:32-33) and in Matthew 12:20, it is said that Jesus will not break the bruised reed or snuff out the dying candle. It means Jesus Christ the servant is attracted to hopeless cases. He cares for the fragile. He loves people who are beaten and battered and bruised. They may not show it on the outside, but inside they are dying. Jesus sees all the way into the heart and he knows what to do. The Lord binds up the brokenhearted and heals our wounds (Ps 147:3; Isa 61:1).

Let me give you an example. In 1 Kings 18-19, we read about the ministry of Elijah. Elijah is a mighty prophet, a great man of God, but he is cracking under the pressure of his ministry. The people have turned against him and his message. Though he speaks in the name of the Lord, they are not listening. Elijah is a great prophet but a human being can take only so much disappointment, opposition, and difficulty. He is despondent; he is suicidal. He travels out into the wilderness and says to God, "Take away my life. I don't even want to live" (1 Kings 19:4). Then he lies down under a bush and falls into a troubled sleep.

Now here is a despondent man, a bruised man. Here is someone flickering, his candle ready to go out. And he is not handling his suffering and stress all that well. He is not saying, "I'm just rejoicing in the Lord!" No, he wants to die. So God sends him an angel. And do you know the first thing the angel does? The angel cooks him a meal.

An angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God (1 Kings 19:4-8).

God sends an angel to this suffering man, and does the angel say, "Repent! How dare you lose hope in me!?" No. Does the angel, on the other hand, say, "Rejoice! I bring good tidings!?" No. Does the angel ask him any probing questions? No. The angel touches him. He does not shake him; he touches him in the way you touch someone in greeting, or in tenderness. And then he cooks him something and speaks encouragement: "You need more strength for the journey." And after letting Elijah sleep some more, he cooks for him again.

If you read the narrative, you know this is not all that Elijah needs. Eventually, God comes to him and challenges him out of despair. God asks him questions, gets him talking, and challenges his interpretation of things, showing him it is not as hopeless as he thinks. And God reveals that he still has a plan for Israel (1 Kings 19:9-17).

But reasoning and explaining are not the first things God does with Elijah. He knows the prophet is also a physical being—he is exhausted, spent. He needs rest and food. He needs touch and gentleness. Later, he talks to him. The balance is striking. Some today conceive of depression as *all* physical, simply a matter of brain chemistry, and so they just need medicine and rest. Others, often Christians, may instead come upon a depressed person and tell him to buck up, to repent and get right with God, to pull himself together and do the right thing. But God here shows us 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 need a confrontation, to be challenged. But she also may need a walk by the sea and a great meal.

Isaiah 42 means that Jesus is gentle with the bruised and never mis-treats them. Richard Sibbes, the great seventeenth-century British Puritan minister, wrote a classic work called *The Bruised Reed and a Smoking Flax*, and in it he said,

But to see Christ's mercy to bruised reeds, consider his borrowed names, from the mildest creatures, as Lamb, or Hen (Luke 13:34). Consider that Jesus will heal the brokenhearted (Isaiah 61:1), that at his baptism, the Holy Spirit sat on him in the shape of a dove, to show that he should be a dove-like gentle mediator. Hear his invitation to "Come unto me, all ye who are weary and heavy laden" (Matt 11:28). He is a physician good at all diseases. He died that he might heal our souls with the medicine of his own blood. Never fear to go to God, since we have such a mediator with him, that is not only our friend, but our brother and husband. Let this keep us when we feel ourselves bruised. Think. . . . "if Christ be so merciful as to not break me, I will not break myself by despair. . ."³⁴⁶

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. A man who lost three sons at various times in his life wrote about grief in *The View from a Hearse*:

I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly, he said things I knew were true.

I was unmoved, except to wish he'd go away. He finally did.

Another came and sat beside me. He didn't talk. He didn't ask leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour or more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, left.

I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go.³⁴⁷

WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING

My younger brother, Billy, was a gay man who had AIDS. My parents were Christians who held to the church's historic teaching that homosexuality is a sin. When Billy took a turn for the worst and was moved into a hospice, my parents, then in their seventies, moved nearly a thousand miles, slept at nights on a pullout couch in a relative's den, and for seven months stayed beside Billy and cared for him fourteen hours a day. They did not confront him about or even bring up their differences. They fed him sips of juice and spoonfuls of yogurt. They served his most basic needs. Eventually, he himself brought up the issues that had divided the family for many years. He was able to do so because my parents had created a climate of care in which such a frank discussion felt safe to have. We talked them through with truth and tears, and many relational and spiritual issues were resolved.

Weeping in the Dark

There is seldom a place provided for lamentation in the church, and down to the present day, many do not give sufferers the freedom to weep and cry out, "Where are you, Lord? Why are you not helping me?" John Feinberg felt the sting of being told—directly and indirectly—that he shouldn't grieve *too* much, that he needed to quickly get on to "rejoicing in tribulations." But Feinberg felt dead inside; he wanted to do that but could not. Reading and praying the Psalms of lament back to God would have been good counsel, but no one offered it to him.

Psalm 88 is a lamentation Psalm, but even within the category of the Psalter's "sad songs," it stands out. Most Psalms of lament end on a note of praise, or at least some positive expectation. But this one and one other, Psalm 39, are famous for ending without any note of hope at all. Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner says of Psalm 88, "There is no sadder prayer in the Psalter."³⁴⁸ The Psalm was composed, according to the title, by Heman the Ezrahite. The last word of the Psalm in Hebrew means "darkness," saying that darkness is *my closest friend*. It is a forceful way of saying bluntly to God—and *you* aren't! Yet when read in light of the whole Bible, the text is a great resource and even encouragement. Heman writes:

[246]

Weeping

Lord, you are the God who saves me;
day and night I cry out to you.
May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry.
I am overwhelmed with troubles
and my life draws near to death.
I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am like one without strength.
I am set apart with the dead,
like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more,
who are cut off from your care.
Do you show your wonders to the dead?
Do their spirits rise up and praise you?
Is your love declared in the grave,
your faithfulness in Destruction?
Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?
I cry to you for help, Lord;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
Why, Lord, do you reject me
and hide your face from me?
From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;
I have borne your terrors and am in despair.
Your wrath has swept over me;
your terrors have destroyed me.
All day long they surround me like a flood;
they have completely engulfed me.
You have taken from me friend and neighbor—
darkness is my closest friend (Psalm 88:1–6; 10–18).

As we read this we learn, first, that believers can stay in darkness for a long time. Three times in the Psalm the word *darkness* occurs (v. 7, 12, 18). The effect is to say it is possible to pray and pray and endure and things not really get any better. The Psalm ends without a note of hope,

[247]

WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING

and so its teaching is that a believer can live right and still remain in darkness. Darkness may symbolize either outside difficult circumstances or an inner spiritual state of pain. That is the very realistic, tough message at the center of this Psalm. 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."³⁴⁹

Second, we learn that 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 love and faithfulness to others." There is no "I'm sure you will bring good out of this, God." Finally, at the end, Heman is virtually saying, "You've never really been there for me." He does not keep control of his temper nor does he speak reverently to God. And yet Derek Kidner says: "The very presence of such prayers in Scripture is a witness to His understanding. He knows how men speak when they are desperate."³⁵⁰ Kidner's point is this: If we believe that God through the Holy Spirit inspired and assembled the Scriptures for us, then we see that God has not "censored" out prayers like this. God does not say, "Oh! Real believers don't talk like that! I don't want anything like that in my Bible." As in the case of Job, this does not mean that Heman's attitude is blameless. Nevertheless, neither at the end of the book of Job nor here do we see God saying that all cries of agony are illegitimate. God understands. Or, put another way, it shows that God remains this man's God not because the man puts on a happy face and controls all his emotions, but because of grace. God is patient and gracious with us—he is present with us in all our mixed motives. Salvation is by grace.

Heman is not praising God—he's weak and falling apart—yet here is his prayer in the Psalter. It's an encouragement to be candid about our inner turmoil, to pour it out and express it honestly.

Third, we learn that it is 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 can choose to serve God just because he is God. In the dark-

Weeping

est moments we feel we are getting absolutely nothing out of God or out of our relationship to him. But what if *then*—when it does not seem to be paying or benefiting you at all—you continue to obey, pray to, and seek God, as well as continue to do your duties of love to others? If we do that—we are finally learning to love God for himself, and not for his benefits.

And when the darkness lifts or lessens, we will find that our dependence on other things besides God for our happiness has shrunk, and that we have new strength and contentment in God himself. We'll find a new fortitude, unflappability, poise, and peace in the face of difficulty. The coal is becoming diamond. J. R. R. Tolkien describes one of his characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee, who has a similar trial of faith and comes through it.

But even as hope died in Sam, or seemed to die, it was turned to a new strength . . . and he felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if he was turning into some creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue.³⁵¹

That's what can happen to us. As we noted, we know little about Heman, but we still have a hint of what happened in his life. Kidner says:

If there is hardly a spark of hope in the psalm itself, however, the title supplies it, for this supposedly God-forsaken author seems to have been one of the pioneers of the singing guilds set up by David, to which we owe the Korahite psalms, one of the richest veins in the Psalter. Burdened and despondent as he was, his [life] was far from pointless. If it was a living death, in God's hands it was to bear much fruit.³⁵²

The Darkness of Jesus

The last thing this Psalm points us to is that our darkness can be relativized by Jesus' darkness. Heman's darkness was used by God—his darkness evidently turned him into a great artist. And so the rejection was not total, as Heman felt it was at the time. It never is. We may feel he has abandoned us, but if we have put our faith in Christ, there is "no condemnation" (Rom 8:1) and so we are wrong. We may feel he has no plan for what is happening, but we are told he is working "all things" out for good (Rom 8:28) and so we are wrong.

But, you may ask, how can I be sure this is true for me? How can I be sure he's present and filled with goodwill toward me, even when I sense nothing but darkness? Here's how.

Psalm 39—the other "hopeless Psalm"—ends with the psalmist saying, "Turn your face from me" (Ps 39:13). But the only person who sought God and truly *did* lose God's face and truly *did* experience total darkness—was Jesus. He really was abandoned by God. At the moment he died, everyone had betrayed, denied, rejected, or forsaken him, even his Father. Total darkness was indeed Jesus' only friend.

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") (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. But we aren't, despite our failures. Amy Carmichael, Irish missionary to India in the early twentieth century and the author of many books, wrote the poem "These Strange Ashes" as a dialogue between a soul and God.

Weeping

"But these strange ashes, Lord, this nothingness,
This baffling sense of loss?"
Son, was the anguish of my stripping less
Upon the torturing cross?³⁵³

When Jesus was suffering in Gethsemane, he could have aborted the mission. He could have said, "Why should I go literally to hell for these disciples of mine who don't understand me, won't stand by me, and can't even stay awake with me in my hour of greatest need?" No, he didn't do that. He went into suffering for us. He did not abandon us despite all his own suffering. Do you think he will abandon you now in the midst of yours? Bible commentator Michael Wilcock imagines Jesus is speaking to us through the Psalm:

It is true that Christ himself came down [into darkness] in this way, and was lifted out again. But here he is concerned to reach back, through his word and through the servants who know his word, to the soul that is stuck in the depths. "This can happen to a believer," he says. "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 lasts; 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."³⁵⁴

Because of Jesus—there is always hope, even in the darkest moments of your life.

Grieving and Rejoicing

We should end with a final note on what it means to "rejoice in suffering." This is not the last time we will treat this subject, but it should now

be clear that we should not conceive of this biblical exhortation in purely subjective, emotional terms. Rejoicing cannot strictly mean “have happy emotions.” Nor can it mean that Christians are to simply keep a stiff upper lip and say defiantly, “I won’t let this defeat me!” That is a self-absorbed and self-sufficient response, acting as if you have the strength you need when it will be found only in God. It is unrealistic and even dangerous. Suffering creates inner sorrow, it *does* make you weak. To deny your hurt—to tell yourself you are just fine, thank you—means you will likely pay a price later. You may find yourself blowing up, or breaking down, or falling apart suddenly. Then you will realize you were kidding yourself. You hurt more than you thought you did.

In 1 Peter 1:6–7 Peter says that his readers see God’s salvation in Christ and “in this you greatly rejoice,” but then adds “though now . . . you have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” It is remarkable that both statements are made in the present tense. They *are* rejoicing in their salvation even as they *are*—again, present tense—suffering deep grief, hurt, and sadness. The Greek word here for “suffer” is a form of *lupeo*, which means “severe mental or emotional distress.” Significantly, it was used of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, describing how “he began to be sorrowful [*lupeo*] and troubled. Then he said, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death’” (Matt 25:37–38). So Peter says many of his readers are in deep trouble and sorrowful—yet at the same time they are rejoicing. Two present tenses.

Notice that Peter does not say, “You used to rejoice in Christ, but now you are in a time of pain and suffering. But don’t worry, you will rejoice again.” Nor does he say, “It’s good to see that during these trials and tribulations, you are not sad or filled with grief, but you are rejoicing in Jesus.” Peter does not pit these things against each other. He does not say that we can either rejoice in Christ *or* wail and cry out in pain, but that we can’t do both. No, not only can we do both, we *must* do both if we are to grow through our suffering rather than be wrecked by it.³⁵⁵

This is a difficult concept for modern Western people, since we think of our feelings as almost holy, sovereign things. We either feel happy or we don’t, and, we think, we can’t force our feelings. And that is right;

we must not deny or try to create feelings. But we must remember that in the Bible, the “heart” is not identical to emotions. The heart is understood as the place of your deepest commitments, trusts, and hopes. From those commitments flow our emotions, thoughts, and actions. 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 when we do this, and sometimes they do not. But therefore we must not define *rejoicing* as something that precludes feelings of grief, or doubt, weakness, and pain. Rejoicing in suffering happens *within* sorrow.

Here is how it works. The grief and sorrow drive you more into God. It is just as when it gets colder outside, the temperature kicks the furnace higher through the thermostat. Similarly, the sorrow and the grief drive you into God and show you the resources you never had. Yes, *feel* the grief. There is a tendency for us to say, “I am afraid of the grief, I am afraid of the sorrow. I don’t want to feel that way. I want to rejoice in the Lord.” But look at Jesus. He was perfect, right? And yet he goes around crying all the time. He is always weeping, a man of sorrows. Do you know why? Because he is *perfect*. Because when you are not all absorbed in yourself, you can feel the sadness of the world. And therefore, what you actually have is that the joy of the Lord happens inside the sorrow. It doesn’t come after the sorrow. It doesn’t come after the uncontrollable weeping. 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.

D. M. Lloyd-Jones, in a sermon on these verses in 1 Peter, makes the same point. He says that we are not to expect that God will exempt Christians from suffering and inner darkness, nor that he will simply lift us out of the darkness as soon as we pray. 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. He says:

What we are really saying . . . is that the Christian is not one who has become immune to what is happening around him.

WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING

We need to emphasize this truth because there are certain people whose whole notion and conception of the Christian life makes the Christian quite unnatural. Grief and sorrow are something to which the Christian is subject . . . and the absence of a feeling of grief . . . is unnatural, goes beyond the New Testament, it savors more of the stoic or psychological states produced by a cult than of Christianity. . . . [The Christian] has something that enables him to rise above these things, but the glory of the Christian life is that you rise above them though you feel them. It is not an absence of feeling. This is an important dividing line.³⁵⁶