

Sermon Series: The Gift Exchange

#3 Give God your grief and receive God's Joy Psalm 30

Grief and Hope

When Penne and I first travelled to Portugal our hearts were captured by the **traditional Fado music** of the poor. Each song tells, in a minor key, stories of love, loss, grief and tragedy, but is mingled with a sense of hope.

The Portuguese call this “**saudade**” – a yearning for someone or something that has been lost while clinging to the **love that remains**.

In week three of our sermon series *The Gift Exchange* our topic is God's joy for **our grief**. God promises to the children of God to take our **hurts, habits, and hang-ups**, and grant us peace, healing, joy and new life.

This side of eternity, I'm sure you'll agree, **grief is a reality**. If you live long enough on planet earth, you experience grief. It doesn't matter whether the loss is little or large, it can be difficult to manage the distress loss brings to our heart and soul. The only given is that **we will** experience grief.

Theologian Scott Harrower says, “the human story *has* a tragic form [but] there is room to act hopefully, meaningfully, and with integrity.”¹ He believes that Christians have a great advantage in knowing that God, in Christ, came into our very **brokenness** and **imperfections** to bring us **help** and **hope**.

How we deal with grief

Sadly, many of us deal with grief and loss in these **3 ways**:

1. Some of us **deny** that loss matters - we say, “**This is not a big deal** for me - it's OK.” We talk ourselves out of hurting over our losses.
2. Some of us **delay** our pain. We hope that “time will heal our hurts.” We therefore think we **don't need to work through** anything or talk to anybody and just bottle it up and hope it goes away in time.
3. Others **distract** themselves – they just get busy and get back to work as soon as possible and put their nose to grindstone.²

¹ *God of all comfort* p. 178

² Some employ a combination of all three!

By contrast, we witnessed an emotional outpouring at a national level recently in South Africa at the passing of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. And last week the people of **East Arnhem Land** come out in big numbers to mourn publicly at the arrival of the coffin of the late Aboriginal **Actor David Gulpilil**. The women of **wailed loudly**. The men cried, hugged and told stories. Is this a matter of cultural difference? Or, could it be that this emotional, open form of grieving is more attuned to God's grace?

King **David** of Israel is good study on this topic. David was no stranger to loss and grief. He lost his best friend, **Jonathan**; he lost his mentor, **Samuel**; he lost the affection of first wife, **Michal**; he lost the first baby born to **Bathsheba**; and his favourite *The Book of Psalms* reveal a pattern common to men and women of mature faith presented to us in the Bible.

In **Psalm 30**, for example, see how David offers raw emotion to God³...

...I cried to you for help, and you restored my health. You brought me up from the grave... You kept me from falling into the pit of death. When I was prosperous, I said, "Nothing can stop me now!" Your favour, O LORD, made me as secure as a mountain. Then you turned away from me, and I was shattered. I cried out to you, O LORD. I begged the Lord for mercy, saying, "What will you gain if I die, if I sink into the grave? Can my dust praise you? Can it tell of your faithfulness? Hear me, LORD, and have mercy on me. Help me, O LORD." (Ps. 30:2-3,6-10)

Notice how **openly** hurts, fears, complaints and grief are given to God.

On the other hand, notice how grief is accompanied by hope...

I will exalt you, LORD, for you rescued me. You refused to let my enemies triumph over me. Sing to the LORD, all you godly ones! Praise his holy name. For God's anger lasts only a moment, but God's favour lasts a lifetime! Weeping may last through the night, **but joy comes with the morning**. You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, that I

³ Even the context of this Psalm involves loss - David wrote this song for the dedication of a temple that he himself would never set foot in; his Son Solomon would enjoy its benefits, but not David.

might sing praises to you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever! (Psalm 30:1,4-5,11-12)

A biblical worldview of grief and loss includes:

- **acknowledging** the reality of pain: not denying it, but finding its meaning in God
- **telling** God about the feelings of pain and loss: not delaying it, but seeing it as an emotional, relational matter with God
- **expressing** a deep assurance about what is **not** lost: instead of distraction, affirming that God's love remains and is good

The Psalmist says, "Weeping may last through the night, **but joy comes with the morning**. You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing." Here is the **gift exchange**. Joy for grief.

- **"Joy"** is not the same as happiness. The songs we hear at Christmas time tell us we should be "merry" and "laughing all the way". But happiness ebbs and flows, while **joy** resides deep within **irrespective of outward circumstances**. It's based on God's **unchanging love faithfulness**. It's a fruit of the Holy Spirit.⁴ Hence, Jesus could even say, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they know God's comfort..."⁵
- When Psalm 30 says "Weeping may last through the **night**, but joy comes with the **morning**" a **24-hour turn-around** for grief is **not** what is suggested! Instead, this is a common biblical metaphor for the **inevitability of God's goodness** – as surely as day follows night, so God's grace will be at hand in the journey of pain.
- **Dancing** (v.11) may seem an odd activity for a griever to us. But ancient Israel often sang and danced at their festivals even when they were the marginalised, under threat, or in poverty and pain. Dancing and singing the Scriptures expressed aloud **what had not changed** – the love of God.
- Lastly, notice how the Psalmist finds help from having an **eternal perspective** to his loss and grief. He writes: "What will you gain if I die, if I sink into the grave? Can my dust praise you?" Psalm 16:11 says... "You

⁴ Galatians 5:22

⁵ Matthew 5:4

make known to me the path of life; you... **fill me with joy** in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

How we can receive God’s joy

1. Firstly, know that God has experienced loss and grief

Jesus was no stranger to grief and loss. Let me list some examples:

- his cousin and friend **John** the Baptist was murdered
- his friend **Lazarus** died and Jesus joined in the family in their mourning
- Jesus wept as he watched his best **friends** walk away and forsake him
- He even endured the loss of his **physical** life on the cross

As they reflected on his life, Jesus’ friends saw him in light of Isaiah’s words:

“He was despised and rejected, a **man of sorrows** acquainted with deepest grief, we turned our backs on him and looked the other way, he was despised, and we did not care” (Isaiah 53:3).

Jesus fulfilled the hope of God’s anointed suffering servant prophesied of old.⁶ God, in Christ, experienced human grief and loss just as you and I do.

Perhaps knowing this won’t extinguish your grief. But knowing that God has firsthand understanding of pain and loss **changes our relationship with God.**⁷ When my own father passed away it was sudden. It was a shock. In my own mourning, help came from someone who **had also recently lost a parent.** In a similar sense it helps me to know that God knows grief intimately. I find it helpful to talk to God about my feelings of loss and grief in prayer.⁸

So, firstly, know that God **knows your grief.**

The second way to receive God’s joy in exchange for grief is to...

2. Know that God has secured your future hope

Just as the Fado singers of Portugal yearn for reuniting with what is lost, so Christians hope that grief will be fully satisfied when the New Heaven and Earth promised by Christ will come. John the Revelator heard Christ say...

⁶ Luke 18:31

⁷ Grieving to an abstract, transcendent divine force offers little or no meaning or comfort to pain and loss

⁸ The disciples were counselled this way by Jesus the very night before he died on the cross. “Believe in God, believe also in me,” said Jesus in John 14:1. In other words: “Just as I know you, God knows you.”

Then... every tear will be wiped from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever... I am making everything new!" (Revelation 21:1-5)

The securing of such a future hope for us is grounded in Jesus' death for sins. Again, Jesus' disciples looked to Isaiah's prophecies to describe the significance of Jesus' sacrificial death⁹, saying:

"Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4,5).

The cross of Christ is the ground for hoping for a future wholeness. Jesus' resurrection is the sign of assurance that his promise will be fulfilled.

Therefore, we can have **an eternal perspective** to our grieving in the now. This too may not extinguish our pain, but it infuses our melancholy with hope – a kind of spiritual "saudade".

I recall the funeral of a 33-year-old man who died in a tragic accident. His mother insisted **she would not attend the ceremony**. She was gripped by grief. I encouraged her to see that the ceremony would help her. She did come to the chapel but then insisted she **would not** come to the graveside. I gently urged her to at least come but stay in the car. Just as the coffin was being lowered into the grave, I saw a lone figure in black stepping from the funeral car across the path toward the graveside. She arrived **just in time** to hear me read aloud from Scripture **promises** to those who die in Christ. She later wrote to me of how this **eternal perspective** stayed with her through the grief and pain.

Conclusion

1. Believe that God **knows your grief** – that's the product of Christ's **incarnation** (the divine becoming human). It changes our relationship with God – for God knows grief and we can trust in the help of the Holy Spirit, and...

⁹ E.g. Matthew 8:17

2. Believe that God has **secured your future** – that’s the product of Christ’s **atonement** (His victory over sin and death through his death and resurrection). This gives us an eternal perspective amidst our present loss and grief.

Such strong faith in the face of loss is not natural to us. Granger Westburg, in his book *Good Grief*, says many people...

“never really work through their grief [and] ...are still fighting battles within themselves [and are] ...unprepared to handle even the small losses which all of us face from time to time.”

Westburg says, however, people of **mature faith** don’t just suddenly get that way. Like the athlete who must stay in training, people of mature faith in God are prepared for a path on which any challenge may come. When grief arrives it is **not a surprise** to the mature of faith. It’s another of many expected battles that must be wrestled with in the company of the Holy Spirit. Such people grieve deeply over their losses as we do, but they know amidst their grief that **not everything has been taken from them**.

In return for giving God our grief, God promises the gift of **joy**: a deep-seated **assurance** of what is **not** lost; of what remains. The Apostle Paul expressed it this way:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

