

Godly Grief Leads to Enduring Joy

Fr. John Konkle

Godly grief produces repentance for salvation which is unregrettable.

Worldly grief produces death. (2Cor 7:10)

Grief

Grief is the inner pain we feel when we lose someone or something we hold dear. It's the emotion we experience when we suffer loss. The archetype of grief is death. When Jesus was at Lazarus tomb he wept (Jn 11:35). St. Paul instructs the Thessalonians that their grieving for their reposed brothers and sisters in Christ should be with hope (1Thes 4:13ff). We suffer many losses, great and small, other than death that are the occasion for grief. We might lose our job, or have good friends move away. We might be estranged from or rejected by a spouse, a child or a parent. Our spouse or boss or priest might fail to acknowledge our sacrificial efforts. The person in front of us in the buffet line might take the last chocolate chip cookie that we were eyeing. We might fall behind schedule due to interruptions to our well-planned day. We might be experiencing the gradual decline of our physical and cognitive abilities as we age. These are all deaths of a sort; they are the occasions which prompted St. Paul to say, "I die each day" (1Cor 15:31; cf. Lk 9:23).

The ultimate loss, of course, is our own death, which may give rise to anticipatory grief. Jesus grieved in Gethsemane as he approached his passion (Mt 26:36-46; Mk 14:32-42; Lk 22:39-46). Jesus also frequently instructs us to focus our attention on these ultimate realities: our own death, the culmination of world events in the end times, his coming again in glory, and especially the fearful judgment seat before which we will stand (Mt 24-25; Mk 13; Lk 21). These are sobering realities. Honest and sustained reflection on them engenders a wide variety of emotions within us, especially the sorrow that comes with being severed from life as we know it. We regret things we have done or failed to do, and we have a growing awareness of the gulf between the person we wish we were and the person we actually are.

Worldly Grief

Whether our loss is large or small, the challenge we face is how to handle the grief which accompanies it. For some of us, our response is denial—not so much of the loss but of the feelings associated with it. We adopt the delusional understanding of the ideal human as a Nietzschean superman, a pseudo-stoic, anesthetized by a misguided rationality that leaves the heart stone-cold and calloused. Recall here the profound encounter between Jesus and the sinful woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee, where Simon's desensitized self-assurance blinds him to his own need for Christ's compassion even in the face of the grieving woman upon whom Christ's transformative love is abundantly poured (Lk 7:36-49).

We might further avoid feelings of grief on the occasions of experiencing loss by covering them up with distractions: anger and blame, grumbling and complaining, busyness and self-importance. Anger and blame are feeble attempts to shift responsibility for our inner life to others, making them the cause of our unwillingness to own and control our own emotions, thereby short-circuiting any opportunity for us to be healed by Christ. Grumbling and complaining distance us from life-giving thankfulness that opens our eyes to God's presence in the most dire circumstances of loss. Contrast Joseph's humble gratefulness in the face of his plight at the hands of his brothers to Israel's incessant grumbling and complaining at God's bountiful provisions in their desert wanderings (Gen 37ff; Num 11ff). Busyness and self-importance allow us to redirect our attention to supposedly more important things, justifying our avoidance of the inner pain we feel. Recall Herod, who was grieved at the request for the head of John the Baptist but remained unable to set aside his standing before guests and so succumbed to the grief that produces death (Mk 6:26). In these, and so many other ways, distractions insulate us from the gift of grief.

No less damaging to our souls than denial and distraction in the face of grief is the paralyzing bondage of self-pity, a black hole out of which there seems no escape. Whining and feeling sorry for ourselves in the face of the adversity of our losses constructs an alternative universe in our imagination, about which we are self-deceptively 100% certain—a universe in which we are the helpless victim demanding to be consoled and rescued by others. When we let self-pity grow in us, our manipulative and self-indulgent 'woe is me' sobbing structures our superficial codependent and enabling relationships, detached from life-giving, selfless, and sacrificial love. Our refusal to take up our God-given cross becomes the passageway to expecting others to carry it for us. Here we have the excruciatingly sad case of Judas, whose remorse drove him to the high priests instead of Christ, and thus to taking his own life (Mt 27:3-6).

Godly Grief

Worldly grief, whether experienced in the form of denial, distractions, self-pity or some other way, produces death. It severs us first and foremost from ourselves, and thus from others and ultimately from God. It abandons us to hopelessness. In contrast, however, St. Paul assures us that there is a type of grief that is life-giving; one that doesn't deny our suffering but invites Christ into it in order to co-suffer with us, to help us carry our cross. This is repentance—turning toward Christ. He is our hope in the midst of loss. Thus when St. Paul instructs the Thessalonians to have hopeful grief, he explains that our hope is in Christ who came to die with us in order for us to be raised with him (1Thes 4:13ff). Elsewhere St. Paul extends his teaching beyond physical death to the daily losses of this life, always in the context of us being not alone in our suffering but united to Christ (1Cor 15:12-58; Rom 6:3-11).

The losses that we experience in the course of life, at times seemingly relentless and at other times relenting for a season, are what the Scriptures call trials. In his *Letter to the Nun Xenia*, St.

Gregory Palamas explains that, in the face of life's trials, we are able to avoid worldly grief and cultivate godly grief *by practicing the first two beatitudes*: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:3-4). In what follows, we reflect on a small sampling of St. Gregory's guidance as it applies to us who live in the world. (All references are to sections of his letter in *The Philokalia*, vol 4. St. Gregory refers explicitly to 2Cor 7:10 at §§26, 48, 64, & 67.)

From Poverty to Blessed Mourning

The kingdom of God granted to those who are poor in spirit is first and foremost an inner kingdom (Lk 17:21)—Christ reigning in our hearts, providing inner calm in the face of external storms. What, then, does it mean to be poor in spirit? Here St. Gregory makes the seemingly simple point that if we are poor we are lacking in something, we have suffered a loss. The examples of loss that we began with are all, in St. Gregory's understanding, instances of poverty. Our lives are, to varying degrees, impoverished by the loss of a loved one, estrangement from a family member, being fired from a job, good friends who moved away, interruptions that steal our time, and so forth. It is important to note that the this-world grief which arises from this-world loss is not in and of itself worldly grief, but a doorway to poverty in spirit and thus to what St. Gregory calls *blessed mourning*, a synonym for godly grief.

For St. Gregory, this-world poverty becomes poverty in spirit, transforming our this-world grief into godly grief, *necessarily* when we *embrace our this-world poverty in God's name* (§48). St. Gregory repeatedly exhorts us to *embrace* our trials, our losses, our poverty; for example, “Thus from bodily poverty *embraced out of love for God* is born the grief that brings solace to those who experience it and fills them with blessing” (§50; emphasis added). What does it mean to *embrace* our poverty? Put negatively, it means not to run from it nor wallow in it, which are simply the manifestations of worldly grief. Remaining attentive to the inner awareness of our this-world loss allows us to notice that we have within ourselves an emptiness that cannot be filled by anything from this world, and that we have an inner void that longs to be filled with what is beyond this world. We come to experience our poverty in spirit. This-world poverty, embraced out of love for God, has opened the door to the eternal world.

Paradoxically, however, the door that has been opened is not a door for us to pass through to God, but for God to pass through to us—in due time. Our this-world waiting has been transformed to waiting for the eternal world to break through. Our trials have become an active anticipation of waiting on the Lord (Ps 26:14; 36:9, LXX). The single most under-appreciated discipline of the Christian life is *waiting for God*. Father Paisius of Sihla, a beloved Romanian elder from last century, would exhort his confessees, “Patience! Patience! Patience!” And then he would inform them that patience is “waiting for the visitation of God's grace” (*A Little Corner of Paradise*, St. Herman Press, 2016, pp.11-12). We think patience is waiting for the traffic light to turn green, or the children to get ready for church, or dinner to get on the table. We think

patience is waiting for the things of this world to change, and therein lies our downfall. We are waiting for the temporal, and then wonder why the eternal never arrives. Herein lies our true cross—waiting for the visitation of God’s grace.

St. Gregory calls the grief that arises from our awareness of our spiritual emptiness *the initial stage* of godly grief. This initial stage of godly grief is, St. Gregory explains, *united with fear* for the vast inner emptiness that we experience is truly a frightful place to be. He compares this to the sense in which the prodigal son stopped filling himself with the things of this world and *came to himself*—that is, he chose to stop running from himself to worldly distractions and remained in that place of inner emptiness. He was mired in the death that worldly grief produces, and yet he chose to stop running and to look inside—too terrifying for many of us. From that inner place, he *remembered* life in his father’s house, which in turn generated an awareness of what he is missing, what he lacks, a different type of poverty than missing out on the things of this world. He becomes aware of his poverty in spirit, which in turn engenders a longing for *spiritual* things (§70). When we follow his example, we have traversed the road from this-world poverty to blessed mourning.

One caution is in order here. There are cases of grief, both this-world grief and godly grief, that are too much for us to bear alone, and the guidance to remain in that grief while embracing the love of God may need the support and guidance of others—our priest, a family member, a trusted friend. Sometimes our grief is so intense that we are not good judges of what we can handle, and there is a danger for us to enter into depression and even despondency. In asking us to remain with our grief as we wait upon God, St. Gregory is not directing us to isolate ourselves from those who love us; for God will often comfort us with their presence (2Cor 1:3-7; 2:12-13; 7:5-13). Our reliance on others, however, is not a time for grumbling and complaining, nor for gossip and talkativeness, but an opportunity to let others help bear our burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2). We need them to help us embrace the love of God in the midst of our loss.

Rejoicing with the Comforter in the Kingdom

When our awareness of the inner spiritual void prompts in us a sustained longing for the loving father, we will come to find him running out to us. Father and prodigal weep—tears, St. Gregory tells us, of grief. Grief because of the profound sorrow of what has been wasted, the loss of communion we have experienced. And yet now also tears of profound joy and love for we have been reunited with our Creator. The initial stage of godly grief, which is united to fear, has culminated in *the ultimate stage, the consummation of grief which is grief wedded to love*. Father embraces son and son embraces Father, bringing profound joy and celebration—a joy that pervades our life even though we remain lacking in worldly things. We have divine joy in the midst of our this-world sorrow. A joy that the world can neither give nor take away. (§§68-70: Jn 16:22)

The consummation of blessed mourning brings comfort, which St. Gregory understands to be the very presence of the uncreated Comforter, the Holy Spirit, “who, in giving His grace, is united to the saints” (§70). In this way, if we “*embrace the grace of the gospel teaching*, there flows a wellspring of poverty that ‘waters the whole face of our ground’, I mean our outward self, *transforming us into a paradise*” (§49; emphasis added). The “wellspring of poverty” is precisely that spiritual poverty that brings forth the inner kingdom, “transforming us into a paradise.” We don’t simply *enter* paradise; we *become* paradise. The process is gradual and arduous since our inner life is cluttered and sluggish; there are no short-cuts. “But if you persist in your intention to live a life of blessed poverty, and devote your attention to it, you will give birth to this grief in yourself and will lose all tendency to regress.” (§66)

This practice is available to us every day of our lives, but especially during Great Lent when we focus our attention on setting aside worldly distractions and become increasingly attentive to our inner life. “Let us, then, in blessed poverty also fall down and weep before the Lord our God, so that we may wash away our former sins, and make ourselves impervious to evil and, receiving the blessings and solace of the Comforter, may glorify him and the unoriginate Father and the Only-begotten Son, now and always and throughout the ages. Amen.” (§71)