

What is a “Psalm of Ascent”?

A psalm of ascent is the song which Hebrew pilgrims would sing as they made the long trip into Jerusalem and into the Sanctuary of God. The Psalms of Ascent show us *how* these groups of pilgrims would approach the Lord.

Thus, this psalm is a type, a pattern, and an example of how to sing as we approach the LORD, but you may immediately note that many of our modern songs do not have the same ring to them, the same tone of dissonance between the sorrows and joys, weeping and exultation, or tears and triumph.

#### WE APPROACH THE LORD REMEMBERING YESTERDAY’S TEMPORAL JOY AND TODAY’S PAIN IN THE LIGHT OF TOMORROW’S COMPLETION OF JOY

The combination of both of these foundational elements is the condition in which human experience really exists, and is the only really honest way to approach the Lord at all when we are seeing reality rightly. Why? Because there is always the wonders of God to behold AND there is always the devastation of sin to behold – thus the need for the completion of our redemption, the restoration of all things made new, and the return of the Christ to make all things the way that they are supposed to be. We feel it. We know it. Even when we cannot explain it or do justice to the exposition of it, we intuitively know both – that God is worthy of our joyful adoration and gratitude and we are desperately needy and helpless and must cling to Him for hope today.

#### WE APPROACH THE LORD REMEMBERING YESTERDAY’S JOYS

The psalmist begins this song of ascent by remembering yesterday’s joys in the light of God’s deliverances in the past. In verses 1-3 he does not recall a specific event, but rather the feelings of the people during that event. They were like those who dream, full of peaceful sleep and safety, laughter and joy. Their deliverance and joy were public and known by others.

But the point here is that this joy was in in the past, not the present. Whatever joy was there once, was now gone. In fact, you can hear it in the psalmist’s voice in verse 3, the

reminder that God has done good things for them, and the simple statement that they are glad for it. Yet, the laughter is not in the words. The peaceful and joyful dreams are not present in the phrase. It is a truth, for which he is glad, but it is a statement of faith, not of present experience.

Rather, the present experience is one of the lack of joy, the lack of laughter, the lack of peaceful sleep and rest. Those ascending the hill of the LORD at this time were longing for those days of the past, those morsels of the safe times and joyful times, the days of deliverance, because today their souls are hungry to experience the goodness of God in the land of the living. This is an ascent psalm for those who are currently weeping because they are currently suffering, whose sleep is like the fitful tossing of Job.

This is one of the things which I really love about the Scriptures – they are so real, so earthy, so true-to-life. Not every ascent to the hill of the Lord, not every foray into His presence, is full of joy and gladness and mirth. Some days are, by the grace of God! Some days we come feasting on the goodness of God, His table set before us tasted and seen that He is good. However, some days we are nibbling on lembas bread through the burned-out desert surrounding Mt. Doom, longing for a glimpse of starlight peering through the curtain of darkness in our lives. Yet, we can approach the Lord this way, too. With tears.

## WE APPROACH TO INVEST TODAY'S TEARS IN TOMORROW'S JOY

We approach the LORD in prayer to remove present sorrows. But this psalm has underneath it a simple assumption: your tears and sorrows are meant to be invested. They are meant to be *sown*, not wasted or ignored or devalued.

What are you *doing* with your tears and your sorrows? What are you doing with your disappointments? What is the relationship of your memories of yesterday's joys in the light of today's sorrows, when the sunlight of your happiness seems to have sunk down into the dusk of suffering's shadows?

How do your tears and sorrows and disappointments become part of your worship before the Lord? That's what this psalm is, you know. It's a worship song. The whole thing – even the tears and sorrows part. The LORD asks us to bring all of our fearful doubts and painful sorrows to Him in worship.

## THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS OF *GREATER* REJOICING AND *GREATER* WEEPING

We follow the God who is both triumphant and tearful, a mourner and a singer, whose incarnation was an act not of mere victory, but of humility; not of outright celebration, but of meekness; not of the wine of Cana's wedding only, but of the wails of the widow bereft, the lamentation of the leper's agony of loneliness and longing, the mourning of Mary and Martha at their brother's closed grave, and ultimately the gloom of Golgotha and the cruel cross of the Christ.

In fact, the gospel leads us to *greater* joy than before, because the greatest deliverance of the greatest terrors and sorrows comes from God's compassionate hand. We remember this as the psalmist. We recall the goodness of the Lord.

Yet, the weeping is also *greater* because we not only see the significance of the deliverance, but we also see more clearly the weightiness of that which required it: sin. In the present we still feel the weight of our suffering. We LONG to experience the fullness of our adoption, Romans 8, the redemption of our bodies.

In the OT this is an extremely interesting and promised theme (Ezek 11:19 - "I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh" - also in Ezek 36). Jesus explains this to Nicodemus in John chapter 3 as "being born again". Paul explains it in his second letter to the church in Corinth, saying that, "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creature; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." (5:17) He also says that when the Spirit comes in to do this work, he writes God's law upon the human heart, not upon a stone.

What is interesting about this analogy is that God's deliverance of us makes our hearts MORE sensitive, not less sensitive. It makes it MORE of a heart, really; MORE of the type of heart which beats in time with God's heart, which rejoices more in the good, but also to weeps more at the bad, just like God's heart. This new heart, like God's own heart, feels more deeply because it sees and understands the real things more truly.

Why do you think Jesus grieved so much? Why was he moved in his heart with compassion, even sadness? Why is he described as weeping? Because He was more compassionate than we are! He was more loving than we are! His heart was more of a heart. Because he had more concern for God's glory and was more in touch with the Father's heart

than we are. Because he had higher aspirations for other people than we do, too. The more perfect you are, the more you're going to weep at the presence and reality of sin.

We have a tendency to think that godliness is the absence of tears. The eyes of Jesus disagree. In our best intentions, trying to see people's sadness come to an end, we use distraction to make weeping stop, and often give offense to genuine love. Love weeps. Love looks at brokenness, even when there is hope, it looks at suffering and weeps. Look at Jesus.

Why does Jesus weep when Lazarus dies, even though He knows the whole story? Even though He knows that He is going to raise him back from the dead and give him back to his sisters? Because Jesus KNOWS, He FEELS the weightiness of death itself, the totality of its horrors, and he is overwhelmed with grief, even though he knows the hope of resurrection and the joy of restoration that will come.

Not only does Jesus weep more than us, he also rejoices more than we do. Consider when he gave commentary on joy and gladness. He said don't rejoice when demons submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in the book of Life. Rejoice in what you can't see, not merely in what you can see, even when what you see is demonstrably powerful and freeing. Why does he do this? Not because he hates joy in today's victories, but because he has a greater joy in a greater victory. The reality is that we don't value that our names are written down where we can't see them, even though such writing is eternally good and eternally beautiful and eternally significant. There is much to be joyful about!

Why does Jesus say to rejoice when people hate you, when they exclude you, and revile you, and spurn your name as evil on account of Him? Because His values are the values of God, and he knows that the heart transformed by Him will rejoice differently than the heart which still overvalues the opinions and approval of men and undervalues the opinion and approval of God.

Therefore, there is a great change when you were born again, O Christian. But, that change is not that you were suddenly endowed with great moral success. Rather, it now feels deliverances by God, both its own and others', with greater laughter and feels moral failures, both its own and others', with greater tears. It has gone from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh.

The heart before you experienced the love of God, compared to the heart after, was stony - it rejected the commands of God as burdensome and foolish - it rejected the promises

of God as futile and worthless - it rejected the explanations of God as arbitrary and powerless, and it was full of defensiveness and excuse-making, of blaming and the utter destruction of those who opposed it. It's not that it lacked any compassion, but it lacked the deeper compassion. It did not see or feel the full devastation of sin or the full preservation of God's redemption from it.

Why was Jesus always pitying and severe? Why did he speak about Hell more than anyone else in the Scriptures? Why did he speak so boldly to the Pharisees and so bluntly to the disciples? Why did He flip over tables in the Temple and call the legalists "sons of the Devil"? Not because He was less compassionate, but because He was MORE compassionate! He KNOWS the severity and danger of sin and selfishness, the terrible ruin which causes, so he speaks severely because He loves severely. Jesus got angry when others were threatened and kept from approaching God in their humility.

He weeps more because His is the only perfect human heart. Consider: Jesus knows what humans are supposed to be *even more than we do*, so he weeps when we fall short. He gets sad when he sees injustice, and angry when people are kept from it. *Much more than we do*. Why? Because the more perfect your heart, the more you weep at such things.

Before we really grasped the gospel, when our sin was merely a law-breaking, we felt guilty for breaking a law, but this motivation only compels us when there is a greater danger of getting caught by the law-giver. We weep, but only when we hear the siren and see the blue lights, when we are caught and seen and known. We don't weep for the offense, but that our offense is known.

But when we grasp the gospel, that our Big Brother secured for us God's mercy at the expense of His own perfect life, that He had left the right of being worshipped for the humiliation of being shamed and despised FOR US, and that He secured for us and sent to us the Holy Spirit of God, the adoption as sons into the family of God, a place of honor at His table, the security of God's love as a Father and not merely the King - then when we sin, we no longer see it as the mere breaking of a law, but the breaking of a heart - THE heart. And we weep even more. To break the heart of one whom we love is crushing.

Like Jesus, we begin to weep more over the sins of others, and not only because we have been harmed by them, but also because they have been harmed by them.

We feel the danger of sin to their souls. We know the damage done to their souls and we know the joy of their rescue and deliverance and redemption into the love of God - and any departure from that, any deviance from it, causes us sorrow. When we grasp our own redemption, it leads to tears for the lost, even the most vicious ones.

And even in our anger towards injustice, there are tears mixed with it. Not only sorrow, but righteous anger, and not only against the violent person, but against the sin in him which destroys him, too, because we know that he is not the way he is supposed to be, and we feel it in our hearts.

Cornelius Plantinga's book, "*A Breviary on Sin: Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*" explains it so well in the very subtitle of the book, *not the way it's supposed to be*. This is how a heart softened by the gospel sees the problem of sin and violence and injustice in the world. This is the defining characteristic of a mind which truly grasps the Truth of God's holiness and man's wickedness and Christ's redemption; of the heart that truly seizes upon the glories and riches of these great promises, and whose spirit adheres to the great and precious hope of God's Holy Spirit gifted to all who believe in Jesus. Thus, there are great tears mixed with great hope, and this great hope makes the weeping heart rejoice at the same time, and not only that but the heart regenerated by the Holy Spirit has *greater* tears and *greater* joy.

All of this to say that weeping as you approach the Lord is a sign that you may be seeing clearly. And joyful hope is a good sign, of course, too.

#### THE CHRISTIAN LIFE SOWS ITS PRESENT TEARS FOR FUTURE JOY

There is actually an interdependent relationship between joy and sorrow in the Christian heart. The joy of our salvation produces tears in the light of present sin, and our tears from the suffering and afflictions of this world are sown for joy in the light of future grace.

Derek Kidner, whose commentary on the Psalms I have greatly appreciated, briefly comments that there is something going on in this Psalm that is more dramatic than that joy simply follows sorrow, or that "sorrow may last the night, but joy comes in the morning." (Ps 30:5) This principle, that sorrow is temporary and joy will win out, is found many times in the Scriptures. And, of course, the point of it is that we have a future hope in the Lord's promise to us, that what we are experiencing today, the losses and griefs and threats, will one

day be abolished and defeated. Therefore, we are told to ‘hang on’, in a way, until the promise of God is fulfilled.

However, the NT goes beyond this principle. It says something much more powerful, and a somewhat deeper element of this principle. It points out that "sorrow *produces* joy". Paul writes this very clearly to the Corinthians: “these momentary afflictions *are producing for us* an eternal weight of glory beyond any comparison.” (4:17)

It doesn’t just say that our sorrows will give way to joy in the future, as if there will be a mere exchange of one for the other. No, it says that the relationship between them is interdependent – that the sorrows are producing the joy; that the peculiar glory of your future harvest of joy is somehow being worked by the sorrows which God has ordained for you now.

This means that the eternal weight of glory which God has promised for those who love Him is somehow *dependent* upon the tears which we shed today. They are the seeds which produce the harvest. This means that every tear that you shed is not meaningless. When David was caught by the Philistines he wrote, “You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle.” (Ps. 56). Your righteous suffering and sorrow is never meaningless. It is working for you. It is producing something. It is watering the seeds of joy to be gathered into sheaves (plural) in the Day of Redemption.

This idea is found nowhere else. It is not found in Buddhism or Atheism or Mysticism or in the Word-Faith movement and their misappropriation of God’s promises. Those all simply want to avoid suffering because it is either meaningless or punitive. But it is not until you see the person of Jesus Christ, who, according to Philippians 2, "emptied Himself of His rights, and took on the form of a servant...becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross...so that at the name of Jesus every knee in heaven and earth should bow” that you begin to see that your suffering has meaning. Though we would rather avoid it, God does something more amazing than mere avoidance. He masters it and uses it for our advantage *while He walks with us through it.*

Do you see this? Jesus sowed His tears, so that they watered the harvest of His joy. “Who, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” Without the waters, the seed doesn’t grow and the harvest doesn’t exist. Without the tears, the joy doesn’t exist. Without the afflictions and the death, the cross, then there would be no victory over death, no jubilant triumph, no

eternal glory for you and me. Do you see the dependency upon such sorrows, upon such deaths, that exemplify the incarnation of the Son of God?

You see, the pattern of the Christian life is the pattern of the life of Jesus: great belonging, humble glory, costly love, misunderstood truth-speak, shameful crucifixion, glorious resurrection. And our apprehension of these last things, the things befitting eternal joy, bolster our resolution for the present things, the things befitting today's sorrows.

For, what we believe about our future determines how we live today, even when our tears overwhelm us, in the same way that Jesus' belief about His Father's promise to raise Him from the dead enabled Him to obey to the point of great suffering, betrayal, isolation, and death. And this faith did not keep Him warm and cozy in the garden of Gethsemane, but it kept Him resolute in the midst of His present pain. He knew the Father. He trusted the Father. So, He invested His blood, sweat, and tears in the garden in order to reap the joyful fruit of bringing many sons to glory, as the book of Hebrews explains, "For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering." (Hebrews 2:10 ESV)

Now, we must not miss the word "will." It is a future hope. Twice the psalmist says that those who sow "will" reap joy and return with sheaves. Even though the psalmist grants that there are various ways in which God works this out, that my tears are not exactly the same as your tears, and your eternal weight of glory may even look different than mine because our tears were different, yet they will both be full of water, they will both be streams in the Negev, so to speak.

Do you see that in verse 4? The waters of the Negev are the pattern which the psalmist requests God's joy to be poured out again. The Negev was a horrible, dry, barren desert. In it are all sorts of *wadies*, or dry riverbeds. Once in a long while there are storms up in the mountains, far off, which send torrents of water through the desert though there is not a cloud in the sky above. They are called flash floods. The Negev is this type of desert. What looks like an ancient canyon is actually a channel cut by flash floods. You can even Youtube some of these flash floods in the Negev to see what they look like.

In fact, when our family visited Arizona a few years ago, you could see the phenomenon of what these types of sudden washes do to an arid environment. They produce

life overnight. Things turn green immediately, or at least it feels like immediacy. But, bushes flower overnight. Green pops up everywhere after a rain.

So, what is the psalmist asking for? He is asking God to do this very thing to their grief. They implore the Lord to water their arid, bone-dry, souls with a flash flood of life and wipe our sorrows away.

And, this is a great pattern for prayer: we ask for flash floods of life, for God to take all of our suffering away, to take all of our problems away, for God to answer for injustice and remove it. BUT, like vv5-6 show, we also pray in the knowledge that even if God does not send a sudden rain today, that we will water the ground with our tears and we will eventually flourish because of it. Either God will send joy quickly, like rains in the desert, or He will make our joy flourish slowly, watered by our very tears, *but He will send us joy*. I prefer the first way, but I will trust Him in the second way.

The Bible is so realistic. It says that there will be sheaves for you who belong to the Lord. Some may receive portions of the harvest of joy quickly. Some may labor long and hard, still awaiting the harvest. Some of you have labored long and hard, endured great and terrible heartaches and loss. Some have come to the Lord, having made ruinous choices, and God has restored the years that were ruined quickly. We must not compare the methods which God has given to each, for the promise remains the same: you will bring in the sheaves of joy. You will harvest. It may be fast, or it may be slow, but harvest is coming.

But, don't waste your sorrows. Don't waste your tears. They are investments in future glory. They are working for you. Water the promised seeds with them. Joy *will be* the final word in your life. It *will be* the final stanza of your hymn. You *will* rejoice. Invest to that end with your very sorrows and keep your eyes to the Summer harvest, lest your soul despair at Winter's bleakness.

But, how is it that gospel joy produces deeper sorrow, but that deeper sorrows produce gospel joy?

THE GOSPEL OF GRACE MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

The principle of sorrow and joy for the Christian does not mean that tears cannot be wasted. They can be. We can weep for ungodly reasons with ungodly hopes. The Hebrews wept at seeing the size of the Canaanites and longed to return to Egypt, but God did not honor such tears nor assign any promise to ease such sorrows (Numbers 14). The NT clearly teaches that there is an ungodly sorrow which only leads to death. So, not every sorrow is an investment in the future, but all godly sorrow is. So, what is godly sorrow? It is the sorrow which God Himself feels, and it is tied intimately to the proper appreciation for holiness and sin in the light of God's grace.

When we rejoice in the gospel, it means that we will be shedding more tears, particularly in the vein of holiness, sin, and therefore of repentance. Here's why. Before you were a Christian, you must believe that you are somebody, that you are significant, and that people love you is because you were a good person. Therefore, there is a limit to what you can admit about your own flaws and weaknesses, and certainly your own rebellious or wicked thoughts, attitudes, or actions. You learn very quickly to hide, to cover-up, to deceive others into thinking that you are better than you really are. This duality, of the inner knowledge of who you are, and the outer presentation to the world of who you want them to think that you are, creates a terrible inner turmoil and tension, a guilt which steals your joy and a shame which isolates you. It would be *death* to admit it, because you believed it would make you worthless, unlovable, disgusting, and rejected.

But, if you are a Christian, and you understand the good news of what Jesus has done, that in Jesus, God has given us not merely an example of how to live, which He has, but rather that God has worked and achieved something extraordinary *for us*, through Jesus – that He has come as our mediator before God, as our substitute for our sin – that He died the death we should have died and lived the life that we should have lived, and did it all for us, on our behalf, so that all who entrust themselves to Him to save us and to rule us will be received and loved as He is received and loved by the Father, not because we have been good, but because He is good and merciful. When we believe this, then we are unafraid to be truly known as we truly are. Why not? Because we are fully accepted by God *as broken and sinful as we truly are*. God justifies the ungodly. We are not accepted because of *our* righteousness,

but because of Jesus' righteousness. This truth of the gospel frees us to admit the worst things about us.

Christians are people who, when our flaws are discovered, can freely, humbly, and tearfully, admit them, because no failures of mine, even the deepest, darkest desires of my heart, can undermine God's acceptance of me. It's held and kept by Jesus, not by me.

Therefore, gospel joy, this joy of my redemption and acceptance of God because of Jesus' life and death and life again, enables me to repent in ways that I could never have repented otherwise. It makes me weep over my sins in ways that I would have tried to hide them or ignore them before. It frees me to weep in the light instead of hide in the dark, and it makes repentance a joy, not a terror. Gospel joy leads to greater weeping and greater joy in the very same act of repentance.

If you understand the gospel you will be repenting much more quickly than before. It won't be terrifying any longer, because the knowledge of your sin doesn't affect God's acceptance of you or His love and delight in you. Repentance loses its previous bitterness and becomes a joy. Repentance becomes a joy in the gospel! You will repent so quickly. You will see your own sin much more quickly than you see other peoples' sins. Joy leads to greater sorrow over your own sin, for it is a betrayal of the perfect Lover of your soul.

Yet, consider the other truth: your sorrows over your sin also produce a greater and deeper joy *because of the very same gospel truth*. Every time you repent you cherish the One who has freed you even more. You feel it more when you have wept over your oppression. Every time you repent you cherish you're the *One who has cleansed you* even more. You feel it more when you have wept over your uncleanness. Every time you repent you cherish the *One who has given you His own honor* even more. You feel it more because you have wept over your shamefulness. You see, in Christ Jesus you have been given freedom, cleansing, the love of God, and honor – deep, abiding, honor at the table of God's household – a name, a title, a place of belonging, the delight of God for you. Your joy at this glorious good frees you to tearfully repent and this tearful repentance leads to shouts of joy.

For when we behold how desperately broken we are, not just a little broken, but truly desperately broken, AND we behold how deeply gracious God is, that He has provided His

only Son to atone for the very lack of love for Him that we have in our hearts; that He has given us His very Spirit to seal us as His own possession to transform the very heart which so often belittles the very honor of His image upon that seal; that He has poured out His love upon us in such ways and grace upon grace *all the while knowing the very depths of our souls from beginning to end*, that produces a deep, abiding, abundant joy.

When we grasp in our hearts that which causes such deep sorrow (my sinfulness) and that which causes such deep joy (God's redeeming love for me in the gospel) – I begin to understand how to approach God, to ascend to His presence with tears in the expectation of a harvest of joy.

We can rejoice in the God of our salvation, and may the tears which we shed today be invested in the joy of our future hope in the light of God's mercies through Christ Jesus, not because we have succeeded, but because HE HAS SUCCEEDED. May we sow our tears into the soil of His great and precious promises, knowing that our future harvest is coming when Jesus will make all things new and our hearts will finally and ultimately take the form of His own and we will be free from sin's presence and all its consequences for eternity. Oh, the harvest party that awaits us because of the tears that have fallen from these eyes! Oh, may the harvest spring up tomorrow!

Lord, teach me to weep like you have wept, so that I may rejoice as you have rejoiced.