

FROM SORROW TO JOY

SMALL GUIDE TO DEALING WITH THE FEELING OF SADNESS

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Beatitude of Those Who Mourn

Jesus says, “ **Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.**” (Mt 5:4). In this beatitude He does not call blessed those people who are sad but those who mourn. He promises His divine consolation to all those who do not repress the feeling of sadness but bring their sorrow before Him and tell Him everything that oppresses them. They are “blessed” because He Himself may enter into their life situation, into their disappointments, losses and failures. Consoled by Jesus, they manage to accept the pain and let go. The suffering thus becomes the “compost” for the new and wonderful which God would like to bring forth in their lives, as Jesus Himself says, “**Behold, I make all things new.**” (Rev 21:5).

At the same time, the Beatitude of Those Who Mourn is the first step on the way towards true love of neighbour. It is appalling to see how much indifference, even insensitivity in the true sense of the word may be found in people in view of the suffering of others. Whom does it still touch when the news reports about starving people, refugees, people in need? We are already hardened against all the frightening news!

Only the person who has experienced suffering and pain himself becomes capable of showing compassion with those in need. “Now he can dare to share the suffering of others and stops fleeing from painful situations.” With those words Scazzero refers to the old familiar way of lamenting before God, which people have already embarked upon in the bible. Thus, one may achieve true compassion with one’s neighbour and at the same time deep intimacy in one’s relationship with God. I thank Peter Scazzero for his thoughts on this, which I have written down in this booklet.

Learn How to Lament in the Right Way Before God

Jews simply considered mourning as an integral part of life. There was a time to cry and a time to laugh. David wrote down many lamentations in his psalms in which he poured out his sorrows before God. Jesus Himself expressed his grief after the death of His friend Lazarus and broke into tears at his tomb (compare Jn 11:35). The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem still witnesses this Jewish tradition.

Even when He died on the cross, Jesus did not sing, “*Halleluja, the world will soon be redeemed!*”, but He expressed His deep loneliness in the lamentation, “**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**” (Mt 27:46). Presumably He prayed the Psalm of Lament 22, in which the psalmist after expressing his deep pain sets his eyes on God and places his full confidence in Him. Thus, he could let the suffering go into the hands of the Father, forgive his enemies and trustingly wait for the new that God puts forth out of the suffering: “**Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!**” (Lk 23:46).

In the course of our life we experience a lot of sorrow, disappointments and limitations. Our culture usually considers such losses as hostile attacks, which mess up our “normal” life. It is up to us to decide if we either allow those losses to destroy our spirit and our life or if we make use of them to open ourselves to new opportunities of being transformed into the nature of Jesus. It is a general rule that we should live through all sorrow and are called upon to mourn it and grow through it. The more we learn to mourn our own losses the deeper our relationship with God will be as well as the compassion which we may give to others.

Jesus invites his disciples to embark on this way and says,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. “ (Jn 16:20)

The Vice of Sadness (Sorrow)

Sadness (sorrow) according to the old monks is one of the Eight Principal Vices, i.e. an evil tendency in man that may trigger other kinds of misconduct, sins, and even diseases.

This bad inclination to sadness stirs inside of us when our wishes and needs are not fulfilled, when we are embittered because of an offense, nostalgically cling onto the past, look with envy at others who seem to be better off etc. If we do not counteract this negative tendency, it may become the breeding ground for a demon of sadness. This demon will attach itself like a tick and make our life a torture.

Limitations Which May Trigger Sorrow

We cannot be or do everything we would like to or dream of. There are many limitations in our life:

- The body becomes older, more fragile and sicker.
- We have limited capacities, skills, character traits, which makes us realise: *We cannot do everything we want!*
- Familiar daily routines are messed up because of a change of job, relocation, death, suicide, affairs, divorce, loneliness, unemployment, betrayal etc.
- Through our status as married persons, singles resp. our family members we are shown clear boundaries.
- The hard work often remains without deeper inner fulfillment.

Negative Consequences of Repressing One's Sorrow

Those who suppress the limitations of life with all entailing sorrow may reckon with the following consequences:

- The repressed pain will gather in the soul like heavy stones, which pull someone down. There is the danger of getting into a latent depression.
 - **Ask yourself:** *How many “stones” do I carry around with me?*

- Denying the pain keeps us from living freely and honestly with God and our fellow human beings. We put on masks and “smile” externally.
- **Ask yourself:** *Do I give an honest answer to the question of how I am?*
- Our suppressed disappointments and feelings leak at another place and have a negative impact.
- **Ask yourself:** *Why am I always late for a certain appointment? Why do I react with sarcastic, ironic remarks, with a nasty undertone resp. icy silence?*
- If the process of mourning is avoided, there is the great danger of drowning the repressed pain in relentless sinning.
- **Ask yourself:** *Which dangerous comforting remedies do I use? Which sins do I permit myself in my frustration?*
- The most common way of not paying attention to our pain is to anesthetize oneself through an addiction.
- **Ask yourself:** *Do I flee from my pain into workaholism, watching TV, drugs, alcohol, pornography, shopping, food addiction, sexual escapades, unhealthy relationships or even into unceasing service for one's neighbour in an association?*

Wrong Reactions to Sorrow

We have learned to react to our pain with defensive mechanisms. Ask yourself: *How do I react to a pain?* Do I negate it: *“I am still quite well!”*; do I play it down: *“My son is super! Only now and then he drinks a bit.”*; do I blame others (or also God): *“It's the doctors' (resp. God's) fault!”*; do I blame myself: *“It was my mistake. I am not worth it!”*, or do I start to rationalise: *“I do have a genetic inclination towards anger or towards melancholy!”*; do I intellectualise: *„Compared to others I am well off!”* or do I distract: *“Why do you only see the negative. Look at the positive?”* Am I irritated when certain topics are addressed: *“I don't want to speak about this now!”* etc.?

Avoid Superficial Forgiveness

If the pain has been triggered by a bitter hurt, it is important to bring this pain before God and to lament it. Forgiveness is not a “short process”. People who think that to forgive is simply an act of will do not understand what grief means. Certainly the act of will *“I forgive my tormentor!”* suffices to receive forgiveness from God for one's own sins. But internal healing from the suffered pain requires a process of forgiveness during which we mourn the suffering. Only then will we be able to let go of it and wait for the new which God would like to give to us.

Three Phases of the Process of Grieving

King David experienced three phases of the grieving process. The first phase is paying attention to the pain, the second phase is getting over the confusing in-between, the third phase is waiting for the new which arises from the suffering.

Phase One: Pay Attention to Your Pain

It is important to pay attention to the pain. Our culture trivializes tragedies and losses. Every evening we are shown images of crimes, wars, famines and natural disasters on the news. They are analysed, there are reports about them, but they are not lamented. The increased emotional roughness in our culture is only taken note of. Those who lament it are considered as defeatists and mourners. Is it thus surprising to see so many depressions? Who would wonder about the fact that the prescription of drugs against depression and anxieties has rocketed? Let us learn to lament all this suffering before God.

Grieving is only possible when we give room to our feelings: One should pay attention to the inner life of feelings such as fear, anger, grief etc., which we must no longer repress. We call them by their name and bring them before God.

The Example of David

David lamented the disaster of the death of his friend Jonathan even three times (compare 2 Sam 1:17f). His psalms testify of his lamentations. More than half of the 150 psalms are lamentations. They pay tribute to the fact that life may be hard, difficult, and sometimes even brutal. The psalms also lament the apparent absence of God. They invoke God for consolation and care. Lamentations wrestle with God's loyal, faithful love:

- * "My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continually, "Where is your God?" (Ps 42:3)
- * "Has his steadfast love for ever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" (Ps 77:8f)
- * "Thou hast put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep. Thy wrath lies heavy upon me, and thou dost overwhelm me with all thy waves. " (Ps 88:6f)

In the evening, before you go to bed, try to lament about the suffering of the past day before God. Write down your pain, ideally in a diary. The night's rest will be more recovering when we have given our pain away to God and trustfully wait for the new.

Phase Two: Live in the Confusing "In-Between"

One of the most radical commandments of our time is: "Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him; " (Ps 37:7). Endure the confusing waiting time and wait for God's moment! In the case of the disciples this "time in-between" which, was difficult to bear, was the time between the death of Jesus on Good Friday and Pentecost, where they received the new, i.e. the Holy Spirit, who filled them. The old has to die to make room for the new. Jesus Himself says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. " (Jn 12:24).

Phase Three: Allow the Old to Birth the New

In the grieving process one allows the old to birth the new. Grieving means: To let go of things and persons and allow the grief to become a blessing. From grief, surprising changes arise. The waiting time gives a new level of closeness to God and change of our personality.

* We find it easier to wait for God and surrender to His will. We feel the reality of heaven completely new and understand better that we are only strangers and guests on earth. We are eventually at home with us and with God.

* We have fewer desires and idols. We are more inclined to get rid of the unimportant things in life, which many are longing for.

* We are delivered from the constraint of having to impress others. We can follow God's plan with a new freedom, because our prime motivation is no longer that of having to do justice to other people.

* We enjoy a new, vivid appreciation of the simple things of life (seasons, people, liturgical times).

* We are calmer when it comes to living with unsolved questions. We are not afraid of saying, "I don't know!" and are characterised by greater humility. We have fewer anxieties and show a greater readiness to undergo risks.

* We become merciful and take greater care of the poor, the widows, the orphans etc.. We can understand them better.

"The worst events in the history of mankind, which we cannot understand, are useful "compost" in God's wonderful, eternal plan. From the biggest evil, the death of Jesus, arose the greatest good. God transforms evil into good, without mitigating how terrible the evil is. " (Milton). God promises us, " I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.... and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, says the LORD." (Jer 31:13f)

Practical Guide

First measure: Pause for a moment and pay attention to the small and big sufferings in the present and in the past.

* Take a quiet day with God and remember your disappointments, limitations, failures etc. and allow yourself to feel your pain. Bring it before God!

* A timeline drawn from birth to the present may be helpful to determine and describe difficult or sad events in life.

* Remember: Your losses are not something one should "get over", but they are of great value to God and for the spiritual growth in your life.

* Write your own psalm of lament as a biblical basis for your grief or look for an adequate psalm in the bible.

Second measure: Help others to realise the losses in their life and reflect on them. Community is a place to accompany people at critical crossroads of their lives (serious illness, relocation, abuse, divorce, retirement, death). Here, one can help people to perceive the disorientation in their lives and to receive inner healing from God.

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