



THANK GOD FOR WEeping

Offer a prayer to God about this divine weeping. You might begin by using the italicized phrases from the scripture passages in the article: “Thank you, God, that you weep, that you *drench nations with tears*, that your heart throbs for people who are destroyed”

Tell God why you're glad for that weeping, and why you weep.

TEARFUL WORSHIP & THE NEWS

Worshipping God involves tears as well as praise (See Psalms 6:6, 56:8; 42:3; 119:136). “Godly grief” is a good thing (2 Cor 7:8–10). As you digest news on the Internet, TV, radio or newspaper, take a few moments to grieve. You might grieve for people who are suffering or who have rejected God. For example, it would be wise to grieve for Jaycee Lee Dugard, the young woman who was kidnapped, repeatedly raped, held for 20 years and who was recently found. We can also grieve for her two young daughters. All three of them were kept in a tent compound in the backyard of a couple in California (for whom you might also grieve) and they will be adjusting for years. (For more information see Wikipedia. “Kidnapping of Jaycee Lee Dugard,” <http://bit.ly/wLmHT>)

“STAYING WITH” GOD

Play the Taize song, “Stay with me” (<http://bit.ly/q4Jap4>). Notice how it combines the theme of the Garden of Gethsemane events in Mark 14:34 with Jesus's invitation to abide, or “remain here with me,” in John 15:4. Then imagine yourself sitting next to God, or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, or within the circle of the Trinity

For more exercises to bring you closer to the God who weeps, please see our online resource here: conversationsjournal.com/the-god-who-weep/



A GOD WHO WEEPS

BY JAN JOHNSON

Rebecca¹ tried to hold back her tears as she spoke. She was responding to a workshop I'd presented from images in Psalm 23 on replacing fear with trust. She said, “My 15-month-old son died during a routine medical procedure. Then a week later our home was broken into and our computer hard drives were stolen. We lost nearly all of our pictures of him. I'm trying to trust God, but it's really hard.”

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ne reason Rebecca found trusting God so difficult was that Christians had tried to move her out of grieving by saying, “But you have another child,” and “God wanted your son in heaven,” and even, “God thinks you're strong enough to handle this.” She said to me, “I don't think I like their god.” She was not so much angry as she was confused.

We stepped aside as I tried to absorb the horror of her story. Finally, I said something like this in a rather fierce voice: “God wept when your son died. God wept when people took what belonged to you. Children dying is not something Jesus was fond of. This world is a mess; this world isn't living in God's will and God doesn't like that. Scripture says to ‘weep with those who weep’—I

think the Holy Spirit does that too.” (Romans 12:15)

The idea that God cries was new to her. After we talked about lines from scripture about how God weeps for people and she sat with that, she said, “I like that God. That God is good.” She began to feel that perhaps she wasn't the faithless wreck she thought she was. After all, if God joined her in her weeping, weeping couldn't be so bad. The image of God weeping answered her deeply-rooted questions: Do I have to be okay that this happened? Why do other Christians want me to be okay? Why is God okay about this when I'm not?

In the midst of pain, people often reach out for an image of God that helps them relate to God when they hurt. Writers in this issue of *Conversations* tell of God whispering comfort to those who suffer, standing by them, holding them or even singing over them. It is also true that what God *does* when we hurt is *weep*. This is part of God's compassion in action. God weeps and *suffers with* humans.

YAHWEH WHO SOBS

God as a grieving father drenches the nations with tears.

*Therefore I weep*² with the weeping of Jazer...

I drench you with my tears,...

Therefore my heart throbs like a harp for Moab,

and my very soul for Kir-heres. (Isaiah 16:9,11, emphasis added)³

God even weeps when people experience consequences and pain that seem deserved.

Therefore I said:

Look away from me,

let me weep bitter tears;

do not try to comfort me

for the destruction of my beloved people. (Isaiah 22:4, emphasis added)

The scriptural language describing God weeping is so intense that “sobs” is a fitting verb for the tears streaming down:

O that my head were a spring of water,

and my eyes a fountain of tears,

so that I might weep day and night

² Italicized words are used in an exercise below.

³ See also Isaiah 21:3, 22:4, 25:8. See also Genesis 6:6; Psalm 78:40; Isaiah 63:10.

for the slain of my poor people! (Jeremiah 9:1)

Let my *eyes run down with tears night and day,*

and let them not cease,

for the virgin daughter—my people—is struck down with a crushing blow

with a very grievous wound. (Jeremiah 14:17)

Passages like these show how God wept over the destruction and disobedience of “my people” Judah, a people about to be taken into captivity. Yet I am even more moved by how God also wept over wayward, non-Israelite, not-chosen peoples: “O oppressed virgin daughter Sidon” (modern day Lebanon); “virgin daughter Babylon!” (modern day Iraq); “O virgin daughter Egypt!” (Isaiah 23:12; 47:1; Jeremiah 46:11) All these nations were enemies of Israel but were named as children. All were wept over. Terence Fretheim, Old Testament professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and author of *The Suffering of God*, comments, “Israel has no monopoly on God's empathy. All people everywhere have experienced the compassion (and judgment) of God, even though they may not realize that fact.”⁴ When anyone rejects the truth and beauty offered to him in the kingdom life into which all are invited, the Trinity takes to weeping. All this fits well with what Talmud scholars wrote about God: “Our rabbis taught, When the Egyptian armies were drowning in the sea, the Heavenly Hosts broke out in songs of jubilation. God silenced them and said, ‘My creatures are perishing, and you sing praises?’”⁵

This weeping and longing is echoed in God's frequent cry throughout the prophets: “Return to me.”⁶ Add to that plea the image of God with hands extended as he pleads, “I said, ‘Here am I, here am I,’ to a nation that did not call on my

⁴ Fretheim, Terence E. *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, 137.

⁵ *The Talmud*, Ed. Rabbi Steinsaltz, New York: Random House, 1998, quoted in *The Spiritual Formation Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999, 912, and in: michaeldorf.com/seder/23.html.

⁶ This phrase occurs at least seventeen times but the idea permeates the prophets (Isaiah 65: 1b-2a).

name. I held out my hands all day to a rebellious people.” (Isaiah 65:1b-2a) Fretheim comments, “God's hands are extended all day long in invitation, even to a rebellious people; but they would have none of God. Judgment must fall, but again it is accompanied by a heart full of grief.”⁷ Think about what you would experience if you extended your hands out to someone like this—anguish, misery, maybe even torment. Wouldn't God likely have those feelings too?

God not only saw and heard Israel's cries, but he also insisted, “I know their sufferings.” (Exodus 3:7)⁸ Commenting on this verse, Fretheim says, “The verb ‘know’ carries with it more than a sense of ‘knowing about’... but the broader sense of ‘experience,’ even ‘intimate experience.’ God is intimately involved in the suffering of the people.... God is thus portrayed not as a king dealing with an issue at some distance, nor even as one who sends a subordinate to cope with the problem, nor as one who issues an edict designed to alleviate the suffering. God sees the suffering from the inside; God does not look at it from the outside, as through a window.”⁹

PARENTAL ANGUISH

A

nother frequent image of God is that of a rejected, mournful parent, pacing back and forth in agony as parents trying to make wise decisions weep over wayward children: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me.... Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.” (Hosea 11:1-4)

Parents who have had a rebellious teenager know how they hurt not just

⁷ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 119.

⁸ See also 2:23.

⁹ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 128.

¹ Not her real name; other details have been changed

for themselves but also for that child who is determined to ruin herself. God, like those parents, experiences the inner turmoil over meting out consequences. So after the tenderness stated above, God becomes the tough-love parent determined to dispense consequences.¹⁰

But God turns again with tenderness, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.” (Hosea 11:8)¹¹ This is not an image of “some heavenly General Patton having difficulty tolerating acts of insubordination [but one that is] in great anguish [and unable] to let go.”¹² Even when parents are forced to witness or administer terrible consequences (a teen goes to jail; their kid’s car is repossessed), they don’t gloat or triumph. They mourn.

WEeping SON, WEeping SPIRIT

In recent decades, there have been worthwhile efforts in books, pictures and movies to replace the perpetually solemn, somber, laughter-less portrayals of Jesus with depictions of a more personable Jesus who enjoyed being with children and made wonderful jokes.¹³ But this effort at painting a more realistic, true-to-the-Gospels picture of Jesus also involves an authentic human who didn’t shrink from weeping. The Anointed One flowed with tears several times, once at the tomb of his dead friend Lazarus, where he shuddered and where his whole frame shook with grief.¹⁴ As Tom Wright writes, “The Word, through whom the worlds were made, weeps like a baby at the grave of his friend.”¹⁵

Because Jesus told us that he was our best clue about what God is like (“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”), we’re not surprised that, like God, Jesus did not restrict his weeping to the suffering of

friends. (John 14:9) Jesus wept even for those who wanted to destroy him. As Gospel writer Luke described Jesus weeping over Jerusalem just before he was executed there, the verb used for weeping indicates “walking and sobbing. He speaks in a broken sentence, which suggests powerful emotion,”¹⁶ lamenting, “If only you had known what would bring you peace....”¹⁷ Tom Wright comments, “Jesus’ tears are at the core of the Christian gospel.”¹⁸

Indeed, Jesus’s weeping was not mere sentimentality over his Jewish homeland; he wept just as you’d cry for a disaster in your hometown. Jesus anguished that Jerusalem chose violence and hatred over trusting him. I wonder if Jesus wasn’t also weeping over the destruction of a place of beauty, as peoples do today when their homeland is invaded.¹⁹ Jesus’s weeping enacted the picture he drew of the father in his prodigal son story: He saw the son from afar, but how? Perhaps the father had sat on the flat roof for years, pleading as God did, “Return to me!”

We have good reason to think these tears of Jesus shown to us in the Gospels weren’t odd occurrences. More likely they were an outflow of the weeping prayer that he practiced, the prayers and supplications that were offered up with “loud cries and tears.” (Hebrews 5:7) This fits with Jesus as our High Priest who “suffers with” (*sumpatheo* in Greek) our weaknesses. The King James Version translates *sumpatheo* this way: “We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.” (Hebrews 4:15)

The Holy Spirit, too, suffers with us while interceding for us with groaning too deep for words. (Romans 8:26) In *The Kingdom Life*, missionary Peggy Reynoso points out that “Paul could have simply said that the Spirit interprets our true desires, but instead he used a Greek word that carries a strong emotive connotation and is elsewhere interpreted ‘to groan’ (of an inward, unexpressed feeling of sorrow), ‘with grief,’ or ‘sighed.’”²⁰ The Spirit also grieves over evil talk that tears people down, talk that is filled with bitterness, wrangling and slander instead of imparting grace to others.²¹ Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins pictured this for us: “the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods.”²²

10 “They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all” (Hosea 11:5-7). Note “return to me” phrase.

11 Yet another change of heart occurs in verses 10-12.

12 Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 120.

13 Elton Trueblood, in his book *The Humor of Christ* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1964) was a forerunner of this, and Trueblood explains the jokes to help us get them.

14 John 11:35, Wilson, Seth. “Life of Christ Syllabus,” *Life of Christ* (Year 3), Ozark Christian College, 1971, 310, quoted in J. H. Bernard. *A Critical & Exegetical Commentary on John - V 2*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1972. For more about this, see chapter 6 of Jan Johnson, *Invitation to the Jesus Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008.

15 Wright, Tom. *John for Everyone: Part Two*. London: SPCK; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, 10.

16 Wilson, Seth. “Life of Christ Syllabus,” *Life of Christ* (The Final Week), Ozark Christian College, 1971, 358.

17 Luke 19:42, paraphrased. Scene occurs in verses 40-44.

18 Wright, Tom. *Luke for Everyone*. London: SPCK; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, 231.

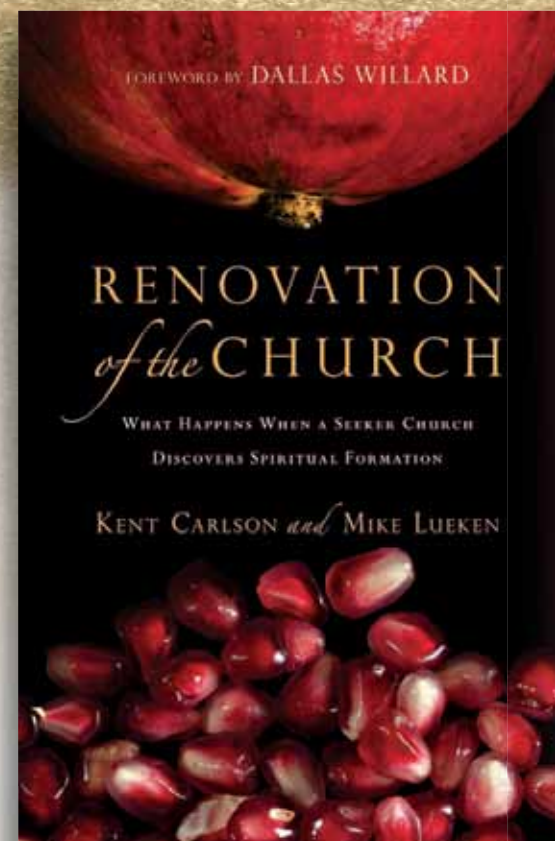
19 See Lamentations 2:15.

20 Reynoso, Peggy. “Formed Through Suffering” in *The Kingdom Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010, 178, quoting W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996.

21 See Ephesians 4:29-31.

22 Hopkins, Gerard Manley. “God’s Grandeur” In *The Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Hertfordshire: The Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994, 26. *Italics mine*.

REDEFINING THE “SEEKER CHURCH”



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These weeping images of the Trinity are often a missing piece of the puzzle for those in the midst of suffering of all kinds: loss of physical health, loss of limbs, loss of loved ones, loss of well-being. While Rebecca will grieve over the loss of her son for the rest of her life, her grief seemed to be doubled in the direct aftermath by the harsh or dispassionate views of God portrayed to her by Christians she looked up to, who told her to “take the long view” and “look at the bright side.”

This insensitive default view of God seems to be that of a harsh, even taunting, deity, as if instead of weeping over Jerusalem, Jesus might have said, “I told you so” or “It serves you right.” A pastor friend of mine regularly calls forth this violent, abusive image of God when he says, “God slapped me up the side of the head this week when...” Others who, like my pastor friend, love God deeply, slip into this default mode of callousness, making comments such as “How can God stand me?”

Only somewhat milder is the often-stated view of God as a “teacher of lessons.” People say, “I’m hard-headed and God knows I need to suffer to learn anything.” More hard-headed than Peter whose walk-on-water experiment was only partially successful? If God aims only to teach people lessons, why did Jesus extend his hand in rescue as Peter began sinking into the Sea of Galilee?

Besides, pain and suffering don’t always teach people helpful lessons. I have watched people turn away from God in suffering and pain. Writes Dallas Willard, “The bad things that happen to us are always challenges to our faith, and we may not be able to stand up to them. They are *dangerous*. To know this, one has only to watch how quickly people begin to attack God when bad things start to happen to them.”²³

But, Willard continues, “What we learn about God from Jesus should prove to us that suffering ‘bad things’ happening to us are not the Father’s preferred way of dealing with us—sometimes necessary, perhaps, but never what he would, on the whole, prefer.”²⁴ Even among those things that God somehow allows (unfortunately there’s not space here to investigate the many aspects of theodicy but author Jerry Gladson takes on that topic in our Transformational Theology section of this issue), Peggy Reynoso says it well: “While we have the great promise of Romans 8:28 that God may redeem suffering by bringing good out of it for those who love Him, it is not what we want, nor should want, and it is not what God wants or originally intended.”²⁵

²³ Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998, 265.

²⁴ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 267. Also see Psalm 119:67; Hebrews 12:11.

²⁵ Reynoso, “Formed Through Suffering,” 164.

The occasionally necessary Spirit-drenched, carefully-chosen “discipline of the Lord” (Hebrews 12:5) that can be helpful is at times “twisted by our imagination to give a false view of God. That ‘twist’ is largely responsible for a morbid streak that runs through much of historical and even current Christianity. We project upon God the sadistic tendencies that really are present in human beings. Given the anger, hatred, and contempt that pervades human society, it is not uncommon that individual human beings actually *enjoy* the suffering of others. One of our worst thoughts about God is that he too enjoys human suffering.”²⁶ In a recent class, Dallas put it succinctly: “Don’t think anything bad about God.”²⁷ Pondering scripture that describes the Trinity weeping can help us stop thinking bad things about God.

FROM WEeping TO COURAGE

God models for us a divine sort of mourning that we don’t naturally embrace but may move toward with the Spirit’s help. By meditating on God’s determined and relentless love throughout Hebrew history in particular, we see how, as Fretheim

notes, “God is able to absorb the arrows of outrageous fortune that pierce him through and, instead of becoming callous or removing himself from the line of fire, still seek to bring about a future which is good for those who inflict the wounds. In spite of the suffering God undergoes, God’s salvific will does not waver; God’s steadfast love endures forever. In this respect, God offers the supreme example of what to do with suffering.”²⁸ God does not become hardened and bitter or mean and sarcastic, but instead he never gives up. We can ask God to give us a portion of this sturdy perseverance.

As Rebecca embraced the image of God weeping and grieving with her over her son’s death, she once again wanted God to be with her. In the assurance of that presence, she was better able to find comfort and courage that God was leading her through her dark, shadowy valley. We, too, can find courage in God’s tears.

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²⁶ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 267.

²⁷ Willard, Dallas. Renovaré Institute, Glen Eyrie Retreat Center, Oct. 13, 2010.

²⁸ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 124.



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