

Mourning into Dancing

Psalm 30

**First Presbyterian Church
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More than 2400 years ago, Plato described one of the most wonderful feelings in the world. Even though you're probably not a Greek philosopher, I'm sure you've experienced this feeling just the way Plato did. Suppose you've been sick for several months, weeks, or days. Maybe it was the chemo. Or the back injury. The heart attack, the flu or just the hangover. Whatever was long and intense enough to make you wonder if you'll ever feel normal again. Then one morning you wake up and, unexpectedly, you realize you are well. You feel good again. Health returns. Energy arrives. For that day, you experience more than just a return to normal. You feel buoyant. Effervescent. Flowing over with life. You rejoice. You smile. You give thanks.

Psalm 30 evokes that very feeling. The feeling of triumphant relief. Restoration to life when you thought you would die. A return to the world when you thought you had been sidelined. David can only rejoice:

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up.
And have not let my foes rejoice over me.
O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
And you have healed me.

O LORD you have brought up my soul from Sheol;
You restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit.

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints.
And give thanks to his holy name.

The words "you have drawn me up" would be the phrase used for drawing a bucket up from the well. I thought I was stuck in the bottom of the dark well where no one could see me or hear me. But you sent down the rope and pulled me up. Even as the world crashed around me, I imagined my enemies taunting me, wagging their heads, acting like they knew all along I would fail. But you have saved me from ruin. They cannot rejoice, because I'm still here. I was a dead man. In the realm of the dead, in the silent, shadowy, lonely, forsaken, colorless place. I was lost deeper than a well, as deep as a great pit in the heart of the earth. But you,

O God, raise the dead. You break the power of ruinous addiction. You send the miracle of forgiveness. You enabled my body to forgive the way I treated myself. I live again. Bless the LORD O my soul.

From getting better from a cold to surviving a battlefield, from emerging from scandal to the joy of getting a six month's sober chip at AA, somehow, some way every one of us knows this feeling. I was down. You lifted me up. We don't need to be told. We give credit to where credit is due. We praise the LORD I Am. We let the LORD know it didn't have to be this way, but by his grace, it is. We live.

That's the heart of Psalm 30. But it has a more realistic edge to it than a sheer song of praise. David experienced what we experience. The reality that these moments of the joy of recovery do not last. We forget. We start taking for granted that life is back to normal. We tumble and fall again. Human beings undulate. That's why happiness is so fleeting. That great moment of pleasure, you're right where you want to be with whom you want to be, and suddenly your joy is leaving. Why? For some deep theological reason? No, your stomach is growling. Your durn bladder is full. You're cold, or hot. Or restless. Why else would there be people moving around during Fontine's death in *Les Miserables*? Why else is someone spilling coke as they walk across you during the game saving drive?

We just can't keep it together. You have a moment of sweet intimacy with your Heavenly Father during prayer. 30 seconds later, before you've finished praying, you're checking stock prices on your phone. You are moved to commitment in worship, and plan to show up to serve at the local ministry, but on the way you remember the sale at White House/Black Market and five minutes turns into an hour and you're back in the same rut.

Sometimes, it seems as if God himself is doing this to us. He draws close. He pulls back. He saves us. He lets us sink. He shows himself. He hides himself. He raises us and then lets us fall. Is that God? Is that my sinful self taking over? Is that circumstances? Just the way the world is?

David never hesitated to go straight to the LORD as the source and the answer for every situation. He said,

As for me, I said in my prosperity, 'I shall never be moved,'
By your favor, O LORD, you made my mountain stand strong.
[Then] you hid your face; I was dismayed.

Perilous moment when I think, “I’m all set. God has blessed me. I’m sorry for the others, but I feel favored. I’m fine. And it looks like I’m going to stay fine.”

Jesus told a story about a man who felt that way. He was a hardworking, prosperous businessman farmer. He had such a great harvest, he had to build new buildings to house all his crops. He had enough to last for years. Enough to sell at great profit during recession. Enough to buy security. Enough to lose plenty and still have more than he needed. So he said to himself, “Self, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax. Eat, drink and be merry.” Of course it’s at this point in the story that I want to interject and say, “Uh, Son, I don’t believe I would have said that.” For the very next line in Jesus’s story is, “God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” (See Luke 12: 13-21).

Things are going to change. That’s just the deal. If you don’t think so, Scripture pretty much says you’re an idiot. Self-sufficiency crumbles. And it could happen in two seconds. Things will change, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. God will seem close, and he will seem far. I will draw near him one minute and flee from him the next. I will serve the LORD one day and serve myself the next week of days. We undulate. We’ve got to understand that. When I said, “you have blessed me, I will never be moved,” the next verse reminds me, “Your hid your face and I was dismayed.” Up and down the road goes, but usually with a feeling of steady climbing and fewer coastings downhill. Near and far our relationship with Christ goes, but usually with a need to cleave closely to him. In and out go our hearts in desire to serve, to live for others, to be part of God’s mission, but usually only by force of habit can we persevere. It’s just the way we are.

C. S. Lewis recognized our variableness. And even how God sometimes alters how near we feel him to be. In his classic book *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis creates a series of letters from an older demon to a younger one on how to tempt humans to ruin. In letter 7, we read,

Humans are amphibians—half spirit and half animal...As spirits, they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time means to change. The nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation—the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks....As

long as he lives on earth, periods of emotional and bodily richness and liveliness will alternate with periods of numbness and poverty.

But, asks Screwtape, you may wonder why God allows us as his children and servants to through such struggles. Why doesn't he rescue us from troughs and keep us in the peaks? It has to do with God's desire to transform us into children who freely choose him. Instead of overpowering us, as he could, God woos us. He really wants us to be us, deliberately choosing to be with him. So,

Sooner or later he withdraws, if not in fact, at least from their conscious experience, all supports and incentives. He leaves the creature to stand up on its own two legs—to carry out from the will alone duties which have lost all relish. It is during such trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that it is growing into the sort of creature He wants it to be. Hence the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those which please him best.

Our cause, Wormwood, is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do [God's] will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.ⁱ

David began his psalm rejoicing in his deliverance from death and enemies. But by verse 8, he seems back in his dismay. He's undulating up and down in his sense of God's care and protection. David is even willing to bargain with God,

What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?

LORD, do you really want to shrink your choir by removing my voice? Do you really want church attendance to decline because I can't get there? Really, God, what benefit is there for you if I turn back into dust? Nice try. He knows he can't really out duel God in a battle of wits.

So finally David just gets down to the raw cry, "Hear O LORD, and be merciful to me! O LORD, be my helper!" In the end, that's all we can do. We trust ourselves to our heavenly Father as we cry out to him. You are my only hope. I love that word translated as "helper." It means the one who can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. It's the word used of Eve in Genesis when the LORD said he would make a helper for Adam. He didn't mean someone to assist him in the kitchen. He meant the one who would complete him the way no other creature

could. He meant the one called alongside to do what he could not do. That's the way the LORD is our helper. He alone can rescue. He alone can save us in all the ways we need to be saved. To the Triune LORD I Am we cry from the very edge of the abyss. O LORD, be merciful. Be my helper.

David's experience was that God answered him. I was dressed in sackcloth, the clothes of mourning. The clothes of death. The garments of despair and hopelessness and depression and desperation. You re-dressed me. You suited me up in gladness. You gave me the glad rags of your saving help. You have turned my mourning into dancing. I got my face out of my pillow and started twirling around the room. I got off the couch and put on some tunes. And I danced. For my Helper helped me. Weeping may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning. This trough time passed. And I exult that you heard me.

Now it's very risky to speak to someone in mourning with a cheap hope: cheer up, she's in heaven. Don't worry, you'll meet someone else. Smile, this is part of God's perfect plan. Speak that way and you realize you deserve whatever pots and pans get thrown at you.

And yet, there comes a time when people long to hear, from the lips of someone who has been through it: it won't always be this way. The tide does turn. You will live again. You will love again. No, nothing will be the same. But this is not the end. Hang on.

In the undulations of being humans, we experience many deaths and many resurrections. We go through peaks and troughs. The wise Christian understands that change will come. The wise Christian knows that things may get worse. We are not promised that we will go through life wealthy, powerful, hale and with everybody we love doing what they should. Not at all. After all, we will die. We will lose people. And people coming back from the dead in this world are rare indeed.

Our hope has to be grounded in something more than just having it work out in the near term for us. The night of weeping may go on for a long time. Do we have faith in the real morning? The morning of life? The day where the sun never sets for the dayspring from on high is risen and reigns? Is that enough to get through these days?

In JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Aragorn is the king for whom all middle earth has been longing. He served the good of the world for years in obscurity. But during the great war of the ring, Aragorn's true identity as the King

was revealed. When at last the evil ring was destroyed, Sauron and his forces defeated, Aragorn took his place as King. That also meant that Aragorn, who had lived for the realm more than himself, could finally have the desire of his heart. He could wed the love of his life, the elven woman Arwen, heart of his heart and light in the darkness of all his trials. Aragorn and Arwen ruled wisely and well for more than 60 years. Through them, the realm of Middle Earth was restored to glory.

In the appendix of *The Lord of the Rings* are found the little read but poignantly written pages concerning the death of Aragorn. Though he had a lifespan longer than most men, like all men Aragorn reached his end. After decades of happiness together, Aragorn, the High King called his wife Arwen to him. He told her that he would soon sleep with his fathers, his days on earth having reached their conclusion. Aragorn laid down on the long bed where he would breathe his last. He spoke to his beloved Arwen. She was of Elven blood, and not mortal as Aragorn was. She would be left when he closed his eyes.

The King said, "I speak no comfort to you, for there is no comfort for such pain within the circles of the world... But let us not be overthrown at the final test, who of old renounced the Shadow and the Ring. In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! We are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!"

With that even as he took her hand and kissed it, he fell into the sleep of death.ⁱⁱ

The world is the way it is. There is no comfort in the world itself for its pain. Yet behold, we are not bound forever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more.... is more. The world is the way it is, but the world is not all there is. There will be death, then there will be life again. You have turned my mourning into dancing. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning.

Sometimes, we have tastes of this eternal life. Recovery. Rescue. Our Helper comes and draws us up from the pit. Sometimes, the only way to deal with the sorrow is to know that these little deaths are not all there is. More is to come. And whether we go up or down into the trough, we will call out to our Helper. We will hold, even when we cannot hear the music, to the reality of the great Dance that gathers all the grieving up into the full and final joy of his love.

ⁱ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, New York: Collier Books/ Macmillan, 1961, pp. 36-39

ⁱⁱ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, appendix A.