

T U M B L I N G S K Y

P S A L M D E V O T I O N S F O R W E A R Y S O U L S

Matt Searles

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

What can miserable Christians sing?¹ How can we pray, when most of our familiar patterns may not express how we feel when we're in dark valleys? What about when our words fail us altogether? Is relationship with God still possible?

In the psalms, God graciously gives us words to pray back to him when our words fail. When our suffering or sorrow isolates us, we find in these words brothers and sisters – even Christ himself – who have walked similar paths before, and can gently lead us in these dark valleys.

These devotions were written to accompany an album of songs called *Tumbling Sky: Psalms for Weary Souls*. You don't need the album to be able to use them, although I hope it would work well to listen to the appropriate song as you read each one. The purpose of both the songs and these devotions is to help people engage with the psalms themselves – so please don't rush over the text printed at the top.

The order of devotions moves broadly from lament to praise, which is the journey that the book of Psalms itself follows. But of course, feel free to dip in wherever is most appropriate; some may want the more sustained reflections on sorrow in the earlier devotions, others may want to move more quickly to the confidence and joy of later ones. The first three reflections on Psalm 30:5 are somewhat different as they are more introductory, and seek to lay a biblical foundation of sorrow and joy.

In some devotions I've included a brief break (marked *Selah*) where you may want to pause to reflect and pray, or even stop and resume the rest of the devotion another day.

However you use them, my prayer is that these devotions might be a blessing to those who are weary and heavy laden, and might help us all keep relating to our good Father, even in the darkest of valleys.

1 Weeping may remain

Psalm 30:5b

**Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning**

One phone call, and life was different. I was called to the hospital in the middle of the night, as my mum had been rushed in for emergency surgery. There followed weeks of visits to intensive care, as I watched her gradually recover, only then for her to die suddenly a few days after being discharged from hospital.

‘Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.’ This was a verse – in fact perhaps the only verse – that I read over a period of weeks. It told me that I was right to cry out, and to mourn and grieve. It gave me permission for tears.

Over the subsequent years as I experienced ill health that prevented me from working, and accompanying depression, this verse told me that my tears weren’t a sign that I had failed, but rather were a sign of where we all are in the story. We live in a fallen world that is shot through with enough fragments of glory to know it’s not the way it should be, and we await the return of Christ to make all things new. Tears may be the only right response to some situations.

— *Selah* —

**Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.**

These words spoke of the reality of pain and suffering, and didn’t try to minimise them. There was no whitewashing of how hard life can be in

this broken world. Nor were there false promises of greater intimacy with God and usefulness in his service whilst suffering. For a long time, I struggled to read the Bible, and my health meant I had to stop pastoring a church of people I dearly loved. No short-term gains here. Just a God with an increasingly hidden face.

This is why this verse is so important. God doesn't say, 'Come back when you can see things clearly again,' or treat us like the child who is told to clean themselves up before coming to the dinner table. God says, 'Weeping is right.' But he also says, 'There is hope.' Rejoicing comes in the morning. (We'll press deeper into that in future meditations.)

Our world doesn't cope well with brokenness and loss. If there is no future hope, then we must either despair, or suppress our sorrows and pretend that they're not so bad after all. With no genuine answers, the only sane route the world has is to minimise the problem.

As Christians, the hope we have in Christ gives us the safe place we need in which we can affirm not just the pain, but also the *wrongness* of suffering – that this is not how things should be. Scripture never trivialises pain or sorrow. David wept. Faithful Christians through the ages have wept. And of course, Jesus wept. Blessed are those who weep, we might say, for they are in good company.

2 Sorrowful yet always rejoicing Psalm 30:5b

**Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.**

Stoke Mandeville hospital is a place of seeming contradictions. A specialist spinal injuries unit, it is a place of great suffering and loss. Yet it is also the birthplace of the Paralympics, and the walls are adorned with pictures of sports stars who have achieved remarkable things despite their disabilities. It is a place of hardship, yet also hope.

It was there, as I was visiting a friend, that I heard a recording of John Piper teach on another seeming contradiction: sorrow and joy coexist in the Christian life. It was a hugely significant sermon for my friend and me, and it resonated very much with the verse I had been reading from Psalm 30, ‘Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.’

So often as Christians we can be tempted to think that our experience must be one of *either* sorrow, *or* joy. But Scripture teaches us we are to expect both. These two *coexist* in the life of a Christian.

In the language of the psalm, rejoicing has begun because morning has dawned. Morning is used in Scripture as an image of resurrection and new life, and so with the resurrection of Christ, morning has begun, joy has begun.

But we also still live in this broken, fallen world, characterised as ‘night’ and a place of weeping. As Christians we live in the overlap of the ages, and what this means in our experience is that we will face both

sorrow and joy, at the same time. Or as Paul puts it: we are ‘sorrowful, yet always rejoicing’ (2 Cor. 6:10).

— *Selah* —

It’s so important to hold these two together and not let one cancel the other out. If our joys are such that they cannot cope with any sorrow, then they will be very fragile, liable to disappear at any moment. If our sorrows are ones that can admit of no accompanying joy, then we will be led to despair. But Scripture teaches that sorrows and joys coexist, that we should expect to be sorrowful yet always rejoicing. So our joys will be weighty and not trivial, and our sorrows – though still very weighty – will not be without hope.

This means we hear the New Testament commands to ‘rejoice always’ in the right way. They do not mean ‘never be sad’. ‘Consider it joy in all circumstances...’ does not mean we can’t also grieve and lament and weep over those very same circumstances. Sorrow and joy can coexist, and don’t cancel each other out.

This means we don’t need to pretend any more.

We don’t need to hide our struggles.

We don’t need to be happy to be welcome in church.

We don’t need to think our sorrow will destroy other people’s joy.

Oh, how we need to understand these things, when we ourselves suffer, but also as we gently accompany others who are struggling.

As John Piper puts it, ‘If you experience this paradox of emotions (sorrowful yet always rejoicing) you will never have to pretend. Your sorrow will be real. And your joy will be real. You won’t ever have to be ashamed of saying, “I am very sad” because it will not contradict “I am very glad.”’²