

“Mourning into Dancing”

Psalm 30 ¹

One of Jill’s many disappointments with me has had to do with dancing. She has tried more than once to get me to take dancing classes with her, and we did start such classes on two occasions, but I just couldn’t get into it.

We Baptists have a reputation for being a non-dancing bunch, and there’s some truth in that. Many of our Baptist forebears took a dim view of dancing, regarding such behavior as frivolous at best and lascivious at worst; and such was the view of my own home growing up.

You may remember that after the Babylonian exile, the Jews were so afraid of breaking one of the Ten Commandments and ending up in exile again that they erected a “hedge” of 613 lesser commands that weren’t very important in themselves, but were designed to keep people at a great distance from The Big Ten. Many religious folk today have taken a functionally similar approach to dancing. We’re so afraid of the dangers of dancing that we frown on any motion, movement, or use of our bodies in worship, with the principal exception of standing up and sitting down a couple of times.

Now it’s true that dancing, like most other things, can become a time-wasting and work-avoiding enterprise, and it’s also true that dancing has a long association with morally hazardous pursuits . . . but that’s not the whole story, by a long shot. The truth of the matter is that dancing is a thoroughly biblical activity.

The Bible says that there is “*a time to grieve and a time to dance*” (Ecclesiastes 3:4), and Psalms 149 and 150 specifically instruct us to praise God with tambourines and dancing (149:3, 150:4). If you’re a non-dancer like me and you have witnessed joyful dancing, whether in worship, at a wedding, or whatever, I suspect that absolute honesty might cause you to agree with me in the thought, “That really looks like fun.” More importantly, though, dancing has the potential to connect us—or to reconnect us—with a deep experience of Joy.

A couple of years ago, Taoufik Moalla was stopped by the police in Montreal and given a ticket for disturbing the peace because he was singing so loudly to the 1990 hit song, “Everybody Dance Now!”² Moalla paid the ticket, but as NPR reported the story, he had a question for the Montreal police: “How do you NOT sing to this song?”³

The moment was reminiscent of Jesus’ final entrance into Jerusalem, when, to the objections of the city leaders about all the noise, Jesus replied, “*I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out!*” (Luke 19:40). All of this is prelude to our examination of—and experience of—Psalm 30.

Our journey through the Bible brings us today to the Psalms, or as it’s sometimes called, “the Psalter,” or the “songbook” of the Bible.⁴ You probably know that there are 150 psalms in the book of Psalms, and you may know that the Psalter is divided into five “books” that correspond to the five books of the Torah. Genesis through Deuteronomy represent God’s basic

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 17, 2019.

² C+C Music Factory, “Gonna Make You Sweat (Everybody Dance Now)”, 1990.

³ Laurel Wamsley, “Canadian Motorist Fined \$118 For Singing While Driving” NPR: The Two-Way (10-23-17).

⁴ There are actually many “Psalters” across history, most of which incorporate various devotional materials with the Psalms.

revelation to His people, and the five books of the Psalter represent the fivefold response of that people in praise of their God.”⁵

The “five books” of the Psalter are Psalms 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, and 107-150. Half of the psalms are hymns or poems of praise to God (74). A little more than a third (56) are laments or complaints to God; and twenty of the psalms either extol wisdom (9) or the King (11). The superscriptions that appear above each psalm were added after the exile, 500 or more years after the psalms themselves were written, and are not part of the text, though they do give us some idea how the psalms were used in worship.

Theologically, the central theme of the psalms focuses either on the Presence of God—life’s chief gladness—or the Absence of God—life’s chief misery. Though the psalms do not present any human as completely righteous, most of the psalms do give some attention to the tensions between the “righteous,” those who want to be loyal to God and the “wicked,” who have no intention of being loyal to God, and who despise those who try to be so.⁶

The Book of Psalms is a passionate account of humanity’s ongoing experiences with God’s Presence on the one hand and with God’s Absence on the other. They are a poetic verbalization of what most of us have felt but cannot well express, a garden in which we not only meet God, but discover ourselves more fully.⁷

God is present in these poems, speaking, whispering, shouting, laughing, and sometimes remaining utterly silent. Humanity is present in these poems, as well. The poets speak, whisper, shout, and laugh, but they never remain silent. They plead, confess, make excuses, curse, and weep and wail. These poems have always been the most used and most beloved pages of the Older Testament.

Psalm 30, our focus for this morning, has the superscription, “A psalm. A song for the dedication of the temple. Of David.” Remembering that the superscriptions were added centuries after the psalms themselves were composed, it is most unlikely that this was used for the dedication of Solomon’s Temple.

Some traditions suggest that it may have been used at the dedication of the Second Temple in 515 BCE,⁸ and we’re told that it was used to celebrate the purification of the Temple after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes in 165 BCE.⁹ It is this rededication that the festival of Hanukkah celebrates to this day.

The flow of Psalm 30 is rather like an inverted bell curve. It begins with thanksgiving, slides into despair, and returns to thanksgiving and dancing at the end. I’ve told you that I write dates in my Bible to mark times when God speaks to me more dramatically through a text, and I have two dates written beside this psalm from earlier this year: one as I began the journey with colon cancer in January, and one when the process of treatment nearly killed me in May—so this psalm is precious to me, as it may be to you. Open your Bible and let’s look at it for a bit.

Section 1, vv. 1-3

⁵ John I. Durham, “Psalms,” *Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol., 4, ed. Clifton Allen (Nashville: Broadman, 1971), pp. 153-154.

⁶ Durham, p. 169.

⁷ Durham, p. 170.

⁸ Ezra 6:16-18; Nehemiah 12:27-43.

⁹ 1 Maccabees 4:52; 2 Maccabees 10:1ff.; John 10:22.

¹ *I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me.* ² *LORD my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me.* ³ *You, LORD, brought me up from the realm of the dead; you spared me from going down to the pit.*

The picture here is of being pulled or lifted from certain death, as a person might be lifted off a sinking ship to a Coast Guard helicopter. David begins with praise for having been delivered from what appears to have been a deadly illness.

David's situation is a good reminder that the number of our days is uncertain for us all. We tend to think that life and death are linear—that death is out in front of us, and most likely at some distance. The truth is, though, that we live our lives alongside the very boundary of eternity. Only a heartbeat separates us from that boundary, and however young and healthy or wealthy and important we may be, we are never, ever far from it.

Now the awareness of the nearness and the inevitability of death is actually a very helpful thing. The gift death offers is a limitation and an urgency that exposes the superficiality of many—maybe most—of the concerns on which we spend our precious allotment of days. The awareness of death can propel us to get on with “a life that matters” before the night falls.

One interesting aspect of this first section is David's gladness that God “*did not let my enemies gloat over me*” (v. 1b). David was critically ill, and his death would have pleased his enemies. We even have a word for gloating over the misfortunes of others: *Schadenfreude*; and in these polarized days of political inquiries and tweets, we would do well to avoid such attitudes ourselves.

Section 2, vv. 4-5

⁴ *Sing the praises of the LORD, you his faithful people; praise his holy name.* ⁵ *For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

To speak about God's “anger” is to recognize that sometimes God allows us to experience the full consequences of our willful rebellion and our general foolishness. As we saw last week with Job, it's a mistake to think that all suffering, all sickness, all trouble, all pain are the result of God's judgment. God refuted that argument in Job (42:7), and Jesus corrected His disciples when they later made the same mistake (John 9:3).

That being said, such things are sometimes messengers from God, and we do well to consider that possibility for ourselves when troubles come. Sometimes, our troubles are God's “severe mercy” that tries to turn us back from destruction.¹⁰

Section 3, vv. 6-7

⁶ *When I felt secure, I said, “I will never be shaken.”* ⁷ *LORD, when you favored me, you made my royal mountain stand firm; but when you hid your face, I was dismayed.*

This psalm was obviously written after David had recovered from his illness, and it represents his thoughtful reflection on what had happened to him. As he looked back, David was able to see that his previous feelings of pride and security had been a misreading of God's favor, much like the wealthy farmer in one of Jesus' parables:

¹⁶ *“The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest.* ¹⁷ *He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’* ¹⁸ *“Then he said, ‘This is what I'll do. I*

¹⁰ Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*, 1977. See also Hebrews 12:6-11.

will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain.

¹⁹ *And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." '*

²⁰ *"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'*

²¹ *"This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:16-21).*

Alton McEachern, a former pastor of a church I later served, noted that we're a lot like that farmer: "It is easy to feel quite confident as long as everything is going well. We may even be tempted to be cocky and proud, thinking that good health and affluence are things we deserve—that having them is our right."¹¹ And then everything changed, and David's world collapsed.

David's words, "*but when you hid your face, I was dismayed,*" might more accurately be translated, "I was terrified." I've felt like that, too, in times when my life has "crashed and burned,"¹² and I'll bet you have, too. In such moments of anguish, we cry out to God, as David did:

Section 4, vv. 8-10

⁸ *To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy: ⁹ "What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness? ¹⁰ Hear, LORD, and be merciful to me; LORD, be my help."*

It's noteworthy that in the course of this psalm David moved through several stages, which one commentator referred to as four steps of a "dance":

The **first step** of this dance is our sinfulness—pride, in this case—but whatever the sin, the movement is the same, and unfortunately, you and I have no shortage of sin.

The **second step** of the dance involves whatever God has to do to get our attention about our sin. Sometimes God has to "hit us with a 2 x 4," but not always. What does God have to do to get your attention? What might God actually be doing *right now*?

The **third step** of the dance involves our confession of our sin and our plea for God's mercy; and the **final step** comes when we receive God's forgiveness, purchased on the Cross of Christ. You and I achieve sin and shame all by ourselves; if we then humble ourselves and acknowledge our need for forgiveness and cleansing, God will cover our shame and nakedness with garments woven of love and blood.¹³

To say this differently, the journey "from mourning into dancing" is a path that leads from self-sufficiency, through brokenness, into an utter dependence upon the unmerited favor of a loving and gracious God. There is no other way. It is then, and only then, that, delivered from ourselves, we perceive that generous grace of God in which we stand and on which alone we can rely.¹⁴

¹¹ Alton McEachern, "Psalms," *Layman's Bible Book Commentary*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Broadman, 1981), p. 50.

¹² As it most signally did thirty-four years ago last week, but that's another story.

¹³ Melvin D. Hugen and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Books & Culture*, Vol. 2, no. 2.

¹⁴ Artur Weiser, "The Psalms," trans. Herbert Hartwell, *The Old Testament Library*, ed. G. Ernest Wright (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), pp. 272-273.

This brings us to the final stanza of this wonderful psalm; but before we go there, I want to add an image from Mark Batterson, a well-known pastor in DC. Referring to Lamentations 3:23, Mark said of the Lord,

His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. The English word “new” is from a Hebrew word that means “never before experienced.” Today’s mercy is different from yesterday or the day before or the day before the day before. Just as the seasonal flu vaccine changes from year to year, God’s mercy changes from day to day. It’s a new strain of mercy each and every day. Why? Because you didn’t sin today the way you did yesterday!

Try this little exercise: Figure out how old you are—not in years but in days. That’s the sum total of different kinds of “new-every-morning” mercy you’ve received life-to-date. By the time you’re twenty-one, you’ve experienced 7,665 unique mercies. When you hit midlife, it numbers 14,600. And by the time you hit retirement, God has “mercied” you 23,725 times.¹⁵

That’s what David was talking about as he ended this psalm:

Section 5, vv. 11-12

¹¹ You turned my wailing [mourning] into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, ¹² that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.

That’s what God does for me, and that’s what God does for you.

The Lord your God is with you.

He is mighty to save.

He will take great delight in you.

He will comfort you with His love.

He will rejoice over you with singing (Zephaniah 3:17).

Your Father will Dance!!!

How can you keep from dancing?

¹⁵ Mark Batterson, *If: Trading Your If Only Regrets for God's What If Possibilities* (Baker Books, 2015), page 61.