

Thanksgiving: The Dance of Grief and Gratitude

Bo Stern Faithgateway.com November 27, 2014



Enter His gates with thanksgiving and enter His courts with praise; give thanks to Him and praise His name! – Psalm 100:4

Deep in the heart of November, I received two e-mails from women who were each fighting fierce battles, one losing her husband to ALS, the other losing her husband to an addiction he seemed unable to control. Different stories with similar shades of emotional trauma. I thought about how in years past these wonderful women would have been planning Thanksgiving dinner and baking pies and creating a holiday to remember.

This year, however, they both cast a wary eye toward the day. "I'm trying to be grateful," one said carefully. "I really am." I could hear the guilt crouching behind her words, and it frustrated me because I know her. I know she's not just trying to be grateful; she is grateful. She is thankful for her amazing children, the beautiful marriage she shared with her husband for thirty years, and for the way their core group of friends surrounded them throughout his illness. She was deeply, dearly grateful and yet, in the season of Thanksgiving, she felt that she wasn't thankful enough. What gives?

Here's my theory: we tend to expect gratitude to act as a sort of emotional acid, absorbing all sorrow on contact. Because of this underlying idea, we can also project that idea on those around us, and that's what had happened to my friend. The people who really, truly love her had run out of encouraging things to say and really wanted to enjoy Thanksgiving themselves, and so they resorted to advice like, "Just be grateful for what you have." And she was trying. And I am trying. And you are trying. But let's be clear: **sorrow is not sin and gratitude does not cancel out grief.** Adoring her children does not eradicate the deep pain of losing her husband, and she needed — as we all need — permission to experience both joy and sorrow.

When we stop viewing grief and gratitude as mutually exclusive emotions, we are well on our way to a healthier holiday, and I think Jesus told us this very thing in one little sentence that takes my breath away every time I read it:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. – Matthew 5:4

Bless. Mourn. Comfort. Three action words that seem at odds with one another at first glance but that, with a little synergy, form a strategy for enduring the happiest days in a season of heartache.

A look at the original language shows us that we could lift the spiritually loaded word blessed up and out of that verse, drop in the word happy, and still be true to the meaning of the word. Happy are those who mourn? Ridiculous. It's like saying, "Healthy are those who are sick," or, "Pregnant are those who are barren." This concept makes no sense until we add the third word: *comfort*.

Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Comfort is also a beautiful Greek word, *parakaleo*. It's formed from two words: *kaleo*, which means "to call by name," and *para*, which means "near." This word pulls us right up into the lap of God and invites us to experience the beauty of His presence in way we may never have experienced before. The comfort of God is a bigger, more powerful thing than we give it credit for being. It's in this uniquely "called by name" place that we are supernaturally strengthened, guided, and loved.

I recently took my husband to the hospital for surgery to have a feeding tube placed. Though we knew that ALS made him a high-risk patient, we were blindsided when the surgeon met us five minutes before the surgery and explained that his chances of coming out of the operating room on life support were very high and that we would then have to decide whether to continue that support or say good-bye. I'm not going to put a pretty face on this—we didn't handle it gracefully. We wept and shook and fell into a hug on his hospital bed as we tried to figure out which way to go. Without a feeding tube, his remaining days would be very, very difficult, and the longer we waited to have it done, the more risky it becomes. And yet—Steve had not said good-byes to our kids. Our son had left for school that morning having no idea that he might not talk to his dad again. Every option seemed impossible, and I felt like the walls were caving in on my heart.

This little event, though just a tiny glimpse at our story, represents the most difficult moment of my life so far. I've never felt such desperate sorrow. And yet (and I love this part), this event does not represent the worst moment of my life. The worst moments have been when I've wandered from God's plan or purpose, when I have not been able to feel Him in my pain. This deep-water morning, though, was filled to the brim with the *parakaleo* of God. I could almost hear Him whispering my name as I wept into my husband's neck. I could feel His arms closing in, just when I thought

my heart would die inside my chest. And then we both heard His clear instruction to wait. At the same moment, we looked at each other and turned to the surgeon and said, "Not today." Comfort, love, guidance—it was all there in the middle of our sorrow because Jesus shows up when we suffer. He shows up, speaks our name, and reminds us it's okay to be broken with Him.

Where is your heart as we move nearer to Thanksgiving? Are you filled with thanks, fed up with thanks, or somewhere in between? What I learned in a sad little hospital room is that Jesus can show up no matter what. He's not annoyed by our sorrow. In fact, it seems He's attracted to it because it opens doors for intimacy we may have never otherwise entered. As we invite our good Father into our grief and gratitude, He teaches us how they can work together to make us authentic representations of His hope in a dying world.

Finding Hidden Hope

Make two columns on a sheet of paper, labeling one grief and one gratitude. List all the things in each column, being brutally honest with how you're really feeling. Now write Blessed, Mourn, and Comfort over the list, and ask Jesus to show you the ways He is working in every area of your life.

For strength, we thank You; it blesses us. For weakness, we thank You; it builds us. When all is bright, we thank You. In deepest dark, we trust You. And our souls sing It. Is. Well. Now, to the One who is able to do immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine, endless, eternal thanks.

Your Turn

Thank you, Bo, for a great suggestion for Thanksgiving homework! Today, even in the busyness — whether you will be with family and friends, or serving the homeless, or traveling, or working, or whatever your plans are for the day — steal some time for yourself and God and write out your brutally honest Grief and Gratitude list and seek Jesus for the ways He is moving in your life — Blessed, Mourn, and Comfort. Then, thank Him that He is with you, loving you through the blessed times and hard times, in mourning and in joy. Come join the conversation on our blog! We would love to hear from you! And a very **Happy Thanksgiving** from all of us at FaithGateway Women!

<http://www.faithgateway.com/thanksgiving-dance-of-grief-and-gratitude/>