

“NUMBED WITH GRIEF”: GREGORY OF NYSSA ON BEREAVEMENT AND HOPE¹



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Abstract. How ought we to deal with our embodied existence—and particularly the emotion of grief—in the light of the gospel? Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395) recognizes the embodied character of our emotional lives, but he refuses to exempt the passion of grief from moral evaluation. While the Cappadocian father is attuned to the powerful role that the emotion of grief plays in our lives, he is also keenly aware of the fallen character of the body and of the problematic character of the passions. For Nyssen, grief and moral theology do not belong to two separate worlds.

The embodied passion of grief can be extraordinarily powerful. Particularly painful is the grief that we experience upon the death of a loved one, which at times simply threatens to overwhelm us emotionally. Given the inevitable force of the emotion of grief and the closeness of the relationship that has been torn, it may seem out of place to ask moral questions about the appropriateness of our grief. To try and morally evaluate our grief may seem like a confusion of categories: the emotional experience of grief and the field of moral theology belong to two different worlds. Asking how we *ought* to respond to bereavement may appear naïve—as if it were possible to hold our emotions in check at such horribly difficult times. Most importantly, trying to persuade those in the process of mourning that there might be something wrong with the emotions that they experience would appear to add insult to injury.

I suspect that upon consideration most of us would nonetheless agree that it will not do completely to isolate our emotional lives from moral theological considerations. Certainly death—and how we respond to it—is not an indifferent matter. Scripture often reflects upon death; and the way in which death connects—theologically speaking—to sin, to the life, death,

¹ A shortened version of this essay first appeared in *First Things* 219 (January, 2012): 45–49. The essay draws on my recent book, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 137–44.

and resurrection of Christ, and to the hope of eternal life is undoubtedly relevant to the question of how to respond to the death of people we love. Saint Paul certainly seems convinced that our mourning falls under moral scrutiny, commenting in 1 Thessalonians 4:13: “But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.”² Responding, apparently, to the worry that deceased family and friends might miss out on the return of Christ, the Apostle insists that at the Parousia, God will bring with him those who have “fallen asleep” (4:14), so that they will not be preceded by those who will be alive at the time of the Parousia (4:15). These considerations are reason, for St. Paul, not to “grieve as others do who have no hope.”

People throughout the centuries have wondered how to take this injunction of the Apostle Paul. Some have seen in his words a distinction between grieving per se, which would be acceptable, and grieving excessively, as if completely bereft of hope, which would be characteristic of the grieving of pagans. Thus, Augustine explains that it is “unavoidable, after all, that you should be saddened,” and Calvin maintains that Paul does not “forbid us altogether to mourn, but requires moderation in our mourning.”³ This understanding takes the word “as”—“that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope”—in a restrictive sense, itemizing the one kind of grief that is out of bounds for Christians. Thus, the Apostle would inveigh only against the kind of grief that fails to take the hope of resurrection into account.

Others have interpreted the passage more radically as a categorical rejection of mourning. While not denying the obvious pain of loss, they tend to contrast more sharply the grief of bereavement with hope of the resurrection, implying that the latter invalidates the former. St. John Chrysostom, for instance, after describing the lament of someone who goes through the loss of a dear companion, insists: “But none of this is painful to us, if we are willing to cultivate wisdom.”⁴ Jerome, likewise, insists, “If you really believed your daughter to be alive, you would not grieve that she had passed to a better world.”⁵ Such interpretations would presumably take the word

² All Scripture taken from ESV unless otherwise noted.

³ Augustine, “Sermon 373,” in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Vol. III/5, *Sermons 151–183* (New York: New City Press, 1992), 255; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 279.

⁴ John Chrysostom, “Homilies on 1 Thessalonians 6,” in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament*, vol. 9, *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ed. Peter Gorday (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 84.

⁵ Jerome, “Letter 39,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1893), 6:51.

“as” in a non-restrictive sense: people who have no hope grieve, but since Christians do have hope, they ought not to grieve.

These discussions about grief do not take place in an exegetical vacuum. Our emotional lives are intimately connected to our embodiment. The often-physical nature of our expressions of grief speaks for itself in this regard. In this essay, therefore, I want to raise the question of how we deal with our embodied existence—and particularly how we deal with the emotion of grief—in the light of the gospel. How does the newness of the gospel, and especially the resurrection, shape our emotional life? Does bodily resurrection imply that we fully accept also the emotional life that is closely linked to the body? Or are we to reject our embodied emotions as tainted by our fallen existence, in order to cultivate instead the dispassionate life of the mind in preparation for the resurrection life? I will make clear that Gregory of Nyssa’s approach to grief falls prey to neither of these two extremes. His recognition of the embodied character of our emotional lives makes him attuned to the powerful role that the emotion of grief plays in our lives and so to the pastoral demands that this places on the preacher-theologian. At the same time, the Cappadocian father is also keenly aware of the fallen character of the body and of the problematic character of the passions. For Nyssen, the emotional experience of grief and the field of moral theology do not belong to two separate worlds.

“TEARS STREAMED FROM MY EYES”

The reason we struggle with moral questions surrounding mourning has to do with the powerful grip that grief has on us at times of bereavement. Our grieving is experienced in-the-body, and not as an out-of-body experience. The passion of grief can have a controlling effect on the “members of our body,” and it will invariably impact the way in which the message of hope interacts with our reasoning faculty. St. Gregory of Nyssa—in whose writings 1 Thessalonians 4:13 featured prominently—was aware at a personal level of this psycho-somatic complexity of the emotion of grief, since he knew what it is to mourn the loss of a loved one. One day in the spring of 356, his second-eldest brother Naucratius, an ascetic who lived a semi-solitary life in the forests by the river Iris in northern Asia Minor, went out hunting for food for elderly people. He never made it back alive. “Having set on the hunt by which he provided necessities for his old people,” relates Gregory, “he was brought back home a corpse.”⁶ A little more than

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita s. Macrinae*, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. VIII/1, ed. Virginia Woods Callahan (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 380. Hereafter, references to this text will be abbreviated as “*Macr* (GNO).” Translations from *Vita s. Macrinae* are taken from Anna M. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*, *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts*, 22 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), abbreviated here as “Silvas.”

two decades later, in 378, Gregory mourned the death of another brother, Basil, the influential Bishop of Caesarea. While Gregory was certainly affected by the passing away of his two brothers, it was the death of his sister, Macrina, in the summer of 379, which particularly shook him up. In two of his writings, St. Gregory candidly writes about the profound grief that he experienced at the passing away of his sister, whose example and teaching had shaped Gregory's spirituality and beliefs. *The Life of Saint Macrina* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection* are both attempts to come to grips with the bereavement Gregory experienced at this time.

Gregory openly acknowledges the pain that he experienced at the death of his brother Basil. He went to visit Macrina a little less than a year following Basil's death, partly in order "to share with her the calamity of our brother. Indeed my soul was keening at so exceedingly a loss, and I sought one with whom I might share my tears, one who bore the same burden of grief."⁷ Upon arriving at his sister's ascetic community in Annisa, however, Gregory found her on her deathbed: "Alas, when we came before each other's eyes, the sight of the teacher only rekindled the passion, for she too was already in the grip of a mortal illness."⁸ As "the memory of the great Basil" arose in the conversation, Gregory acknowledges: "[M]y soul drooped, my face fell dejected, and the tears streamed from my eyes."⁹

The ensuing discussion turned out to be terribly difficult for Gregory. Not yet healed from the pain of his brother's loss, he now faced the prospect of his sister dying, as well. Remarkably, as Gregory describes it, the dying virgin Macrina holds her passions in check much more so than does Gregory himself. Macrina—"the teacher" as Nyssen calls her—uses her younger brother's visit to give him a final lesson on the soul and the resurrection. Using her own situation as a launching pad, she expounds on what happens at the moment of death, explains how it is that the soul is able to recognize the body on the final day, and discusses with Gregory questions surrounding purification after death, the origin of the soul, and the nature of the resurrection body.

The entire dialogue between Macrina and Gregory—*On the Soul and the Resurrection* being modelled on Plato's *Phaedo*—serves as a response to the violent grief that Gregory experiences at his sister's bedside. Macrina first allows Gregory to give expression to his grief: "She, like an expert equestrian, allowed me briefly to be carried away by the torrent of my grief."¹⁰ However, Macrina's patience with her brother does not last long: "Then she endeavoured to bridle me with words and to steer with the bit of her own reasoning the disorder of my soul. The apostolic saying put

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 46, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1859), 12A. Hereafter, references to this text will be abbreviated as "*An et res* (PG)."

⁸ *An et res* (PG 46.12A).

⁹ *Macr* (GNO VIII/1.389); Silvas 128.

¹⁰ *An et res* (PG 46.12A).

forward by her was: ‘*One ought not grieve for those who have fallen sleep, for this is the passion only of those who have no hope*’ (cf. I Thessalonians 4. 13).”¹¹ The discussion at Macrina’s bedside ensues as a result of the question of whether or not grief is appropriate in the face of bereavement.

When the conversation ended and Macrina breathed her last, Gregory was “numbed with grief,” as he recalls in *The Life of Macrina*. When he heard the mournful wailing of the virgins of the community, Gregory comments, “[M]y reason no longer remained steady, but as if submerged by a torrent in flood, was swept under by passion. Thereupon, disregarding the duty at hand, I yielded myself up wholly to the lamentations.”¹² Contrasting “reason” with “passion,” Gregory acknowledges that he was unable to maintain his equilibrium in the face of the horror of death. As we will see, Gregory often draws similar contrasts between reason and passion. He is convinced that the former ought to be in control and that the latter is problematic. Gregory’s admission of being “swept under by passion” makes clear that he is not averse to self-criticism. He recognizes that the power of passion is often overwhelming in the face of death.

Gregory’s critical self-evaluation stands in remarkable contrast with the way he regards the monastic community’s reaction of to Macrina’s death. It is their display of sadness that renders it impossible for the Bishop to restrain himself. Nonetheless, he does not describe *their* grief as an abandonment of “reason” or as a lapse into “passion.” Rather, the “virgins’ grief seemed just and commendable,” maintains Nyssen.¹³ His point is not that the loss was so overwhelming that it became excusable, perhaps even right, to lament the death of a beloved friend. We need to carefully note how Gregory articulates his justification of the lament: “For it was not as if [the virgins] were bewailing the loss of some affection or bond according to the flesh, or any other such attachment which human beings find hard to bear when disasters come, but it was as those being torn away from their hope in God and the salvation of their souls that they cried out and loudly bewailed in these lamentations. . . .”¹⁴ Gregory insists that “loss of affection” is insufficient reason to mourn. It is not the loss of companionship that makes the virgins weep. Judging by St. Gregory’s comments, such grieving would not be morally acceptable.

As he describes the contents of the virgins’ expressions of grief, it becomes clear that what they bewailed was the loss of Macrina as their spiritual guide. Macrina “the teacher” was gone. And so the virgins cry out,

The lamp of our eyes is extinguished!
The light that guided our souls is taken away!
The surety of our life is dissolved!

¹¹ Ibid.; translation adjusted.

¹² *Macr* (GNO VIII/1.400); Silvas 136.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

The seal of incorruptibility is removed!
 The bond of our harmony is broken!
 The firmness of the vacillating is trampled asunder!
 The cure of the infirm is withdrawn!
 With you the night became for us as the day,
 for we were illumined by your pure life.
 But now even our day shall be changed to deep gloom!¹⁵

The mournful cries of the virgins focus on the spiritual loss that Macrina's death implies for the community. It is their concern for their spiritual well-being, their fear that this is now in grave danger, which according to Gregory somehow makes it right for them to weep.

After an all-night vigil, the funeral procession—a “kind of mystic procession”—moved to the tomb. Upon arrival, chaos broke out when one of the virgins cried out that they would “never look upon that godlike face again. Thereupon the other virgins cried out the same with her, and a disorderly confusion overthrew the orderly and sacred character of the psalmody, with everyone else sobbing at the wailing of the virgins.”¹⁶

The sheer richness of vocabulary—“crying,” “sobbing,” “wailing”—is an indication that St. Gregory goes out of his way to highlight the indescribable pain that Macrina's ascetic community goes through at the loss of their leader. Gregory in no way mitigates the hurt; nor does he in any way belittle the unavoidable grief that comes over the community. It is also noteworthy that he does not criticize the virgins for their wailing, despite the obviously chaotic scene that takes place at the burial site. The only real criticism—regarding a lapse from “reason” into “passion”—is one that the Bishop reserves for himself.

“LET ALONE, YE THAT WOULD CONSOLE”

But Gregory does not merely refrain from criticizing others for their grief. In several of his funeral orations, he actively encourages the congregation to give full voice to their sense of loss. In May 381, the presiding officer of the famous Council of Constantinople, Bishop Meletius, passed away, and Gregory was called upon to preach the homily at his funeral. “How can I lift up the eyes of my soul,” exclaims Gregory in his sermon, “veiled as I am with this darkness of misfortune? Who will pierce for me this deep dark cloud of grief, and light up again, as out of a clear sky, the bright ray of peace?”¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Funeral Oration on Meletius*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890–1900), 513. Hereafter, references to this text will be abbreviated as “*Melet* (NPNF).”

St. Gregory asks whether passionate grief is unreasonable for the occasion, and he then comments: “Is it not rather that I reach not the full extent of our loss, though I exceed in the loudness of my expression of grief? Lend me, oh lend me, my brethren, the tear of sympathy.”¹⁸

He then reminds his audience that at the recent installation of his friend, Gregory Nazianzen, as Bishop of Constantinople, he had rejoiced with those who rejoice (Rom. 12:15). And he continues his biblical appeal by adding: “This *we* have done. It is for *you* to return it by ‘weeping with them that weep.’”¹⁹ As he is lamenting the loss of the astounding qualities of Bishop Meletius, Nyssen calls out: “I feel an impulse, as if I were on the stage, to shout aloud for our calamity. Oh! Church, I pity you. To you, the city of Antioch, I address my words. I pity you for this sudden reversal. How has your beauty been despoiled! How have you been robbed of your ornaments! How suddenly has the flower faded!”²⁰ A little later, he exclaims: “Let alone, ye that would console; let alone; force not on us your consolation [Isa. 22:4]. Let the widow mourn deeply. Let her perceive the loss that has been inflicted on her.”²¹ Gregory appears not to restrain himself whatsoever, as he pastorally acknowledges his own grief and also draws along the congregation in his lamentation.

We see something similar in a funeral oration that Gregory preached a few years later, perhaps in the summer of 385. This homily must have been particularly difficult to preach, since it was on the occasion of the passing away of the young princess Pulcheria, daughter of Emperor Theodosius and Empress Flacilla, who died at the young age of six or seven. Here, too, Gregory shows himself keenly aware of the grave impact that the young girl’s death is having, especially on her parents but also, of course, on many others.

Gregory begins by commenting on the fact that the people are lamenting two earthquakes at the same time: the physical earthquake that shook Constantinople probably almost exactly a year earlier and the earthquake of Pulcheria’s death: “I do not know how I should make use of the discourse; for I see that the subject is twofold and gloomy in each case, so that it is not easy to proceed with the discourse without tears, whichever of the two is chosen.”²² As he reflects on the death of such a young girl, Nyssen laments: “Who passed by the calamity without groaning? Who did not bemoan the loss of life? Who has not shed tears at the calamity? Who has not mingled his own voice with the common funeral lament?”²³

¹⁸ *Melet* 444 (NPNF II/5.514).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Melet* 446–47 (NPNF II/5.514).

²¹ *Melet* 448–49 (NPNF II/5.515); translation adjusted.

²² Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio consolatoria in Pulcheriam*, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. IX, ed. Andreas Spira (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 461. Translations from the *Oratio consolatoria in Pulcheriam* are my own and will hereafter be abbreviated as “*Pulcher* (GNO IX).”

²³ *Pulcher* 463 (GNO IX).

When only a little later, in 386, the Empress herself died while traveling in Thrace, again Gregory was called upon to attend to people's suffering and loss: "For look how in a short time we have been gripped by such evils. Not yet recovered from the earlier blow, the tear not yet wiped from the eyes, we again experience terrible misfortune."²⁴ Not only do the people greet Flacilla's coffin with lament, but the clouds, too, are "weeping gentle drops" of tears.²⁵ The funeral orations leave little doubt either about Nyssen's recognition of the tremendous hold that grief exercises on people or about his pastoral ability to enter into the suffering of his audience.

One might be tempted to draw the conclusion that St. Gregory accepts the emotion of grief not just as an unavoidable reaction to the loss of a loved one, but also as a healthy reaction. It may seem from his funeral orations that Gregory holds to an integrated psychology that wholeheartedly accepts the life of the passions. Why else would he not only acknowledge his own grief but also encourage others to grieve, as well?

This, of course, is how many today regard grief. Seminary classes teach young pastors that there are set stages of grief that we inevitably go through. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's well-known 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, delineates five distinct stages.²⁶ While her model is based on research dealing with dying patients, her work is often used to describe stages of grief after a loved one has passed away. According to this model, we begin with denial, as we refuse to acknowledge the death of our loved one. This is followed by anger that this is happening to us. Next, we move to bargaining, the stage in which we try to make a deal to prevent or perhaps even reverse the loss. This is followed by the stage of depression, when the real grieving and lamenting takes place. In the final stage, that of acceptance, the grieving person genuinely comes to grips with the reality of death. Despite the usual caveats—that not all people go through each of the stages, that the stages do not always follow each other in the same order, and that the various stages often cyclically repeat themselves—Kübler-Ross's work both reflects and contributes to the modern tendency to look at sociological realities (such as grieving over bereavement) in abstraction from moral-theological considerations: grief is what it is, and we ought not to complicate matters by adding theological considerations; they may easily undermine the healing process, of which grieving is an integral part.

The fourth-century Bishop may seem to fit this contemporary mould, with his repeated and frank admissions of shedding tears at Macrina's death and with his bold homiletic moves in which he sweeps his audience along in his own lament. Indeed, several recent students of Gregory of

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio funebris in Flacillam imperatricem*, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. IX, ed. Andreas Spira (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 481. Translations from the *Oratio funebris in Flacillam imperatricem* are my own and will hereafter be abbreviated as "*Flacill.*"

²⁵ *Flacill* 482 (GNO IX).

²⁶ Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families* (New York: Touchstone, 1969).

Nyssa have highlighted the psycho-somatic unity of Gregory's anthropology and have downplayed his ascetic tendencies. In line with this trend in Nyssen scholarship, Rowan Williams published an influential essay in 1993 (entitled "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion") in which he argues that for Gregory the emotion of grief is something positive, as it serves to arrive at greater self-knowledge.²⁷ Williams defends Gregory against the charge of looking at the rational faculty as a separate, additional capacity, isolated from the "accretions" of animal impulses, and exempt from moral evaluation. Williams's article focuses strictly on the dialogue between Gregory and Macrina. But in some ways the strongest arguments for Williams's position would seem to lie not in *The Life of Macrina* or in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* but in Gregory's funeral orations, where he unequivocally encourages his congregation to give voice to their grief.

I am not convinced, however, that such a reading of Gregory is correct. (And Williams's arguments have been carefully refuted by J. Warren Smith from Duke Divinity School.²⁸) Our contemporary culture tends to be concerned to counter rationalism—that regards reason as a distinct faculty that gives guidance to the emotions and sets proper limits for them. The problem with such Platonist rationalism—hugely influential in the Christian tradition—is, so we often think, that it elevates reason to a position beyond moral evaluation. We tend to be particularly suspicious of the dualism inherent in this traditional Christian account: the mind, on this rationalist view, is autonomous, while the emotions become suspect as inherently problematic. Understandably, with the traditional dichotomy between reason and passion, reason always wins out, and as a result grief is regarded as inherently problematic. The difficulty with much of the Christian tradition, on this contemporary account, is that too often death has been regarded as the soul's entry into a better state, at which point the body and its passions are left behind. Put differently, grief, on the traditional Christian view, is ultimately a mistake in judgement; reason erroneously judges the loved one's entry into a better place to be a loss, and hence we grieve. If only we recognized our loved ones' newly acquired heavenly bliss, we would stop our grieving.

While somewhat caricatured perhaps, this description of traditional Christian views of the passions and of the afterlife does to some extent reflect commonly held opinions. But I am not convinced that they are uni-

²⁷ Rowan Williams, "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion," in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead*, ed. Lionel R. Wickham and Caroline P. Bammel with Erica C. D. Hunter, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 227–46.

²⁸ J. Warren Smith, "Macrina, Tamer of Horses and Healer of Souls: Grief and the Therapy of Hope in Gregory of Nyssa's *De anima et resurrectione*," *Journal of Theological Studies* 52 (2001): 37–60.

formly problematic; in fact, I must confess that I have quite a bit of sympathy for these traditional positions. Of course, my sympathy runs a gamut of objections that are pastoral, theological, and cultural in character. The pastoral objection weighs the heaviest, I suspect. By arguing that grief is ultimately based on a mistake in rational judgement, does not much of the Christian tradition show that it is basically insensitive to the terrible loss that people go through? Is not it adding insult to injury to want to “comfort” people with considerations regarding the loved one’s eternal destiny? It would seem that by putting reason in charge of the emotions, we deprive people from the ability to heal properly and we wrongly blame them for involuntary emotions precisely at a time when these individuals are most vulnerable.

Gregory, so we may think, would escape the judgement of our contemporary sensibilities. After all, we have seen that he preaches in a pastorally eminently sensitive manner. We have heard him acknowledge his own grief and encourage others to give expression to it, as well. Understandably, therefore, Williams and others believe that Gregory escapes our contemporary pastoral and theological disapproval of Platonic rationalism. Perhaps we can hold up Gregory as a lone counter-voice in the Platonic desert of emotions. The truth of the matter, however, seems to me more complex, both with regard to Gregory’s views and with regard to our common cultural acceptance of the passion of grief.

“BUT LET ME HAVE ALL TEARS WIPED AWAY”

In order to grasp the complexity of Gregory’s position, we need to go back to Macrina’s insistence—with an appeal to 1 Thessalonians 4:13—that grief is the passion of those who have no hope, which appears to imply a non-restrictive reading of the Pauline text. While in the dialogue with his sister, the grieving Gregory presents pressing objections and gives his sister a great deal of opposition, even forcing her to modify some of her most strongly worded comments, she remains adamant that the passion of grief implies a failure of the theological virtue of hope. In the rhetorical form of the dialogue, Macrina is the one who most clearly articulates St. Gregory’s own, real viewpoint. The grieving Gregory answers his sister “rather brashly” because, he says, “I had not yet recovered my reasoning from passion.”²⁹ We have noticed this same opposition between reason and passion in Gregory before; it is a contrast that keeps occurring throughout his writings on death and grieving.

How, then, do we reconcile Gregory’s theological objections to grief with the pastoral sensitivity that he displays in his funeral orations? Is Gregory the theologian at odds with Gregory the pastor? I do not think this is

²⁹ *An et res* (PG 46.17A).

the case, as a somewhat deeper investigation of his funeral orations will make clear. Each of these orations has a point of transition that marks the end of Gregory's sympathizing with his congregation's grief and the beginning of his attempt to lead them out of their grief toward a stance of genuine hope.

In the oration for Meletius, the turning point occurs when Gregory comments, "But let me have all tears wiped away, for I feel that I am indulging more than is right in this womanish sorrow for our loss."³⁰ He then insists that Bishop Meletius, whom he characterizes as the congregation's bridegroom, "has not been taken from us" but "stands in our midst, though we see him not."³¹ Meletius has taken off his tunics of hide (the body in its fallen condition) and is enjoying the beatific vision in the Promised Land. Gregory rejects grief with a reference to 1 Thessalonians 4:13, and he appeals to Proverbs 31:6 ("Give . . . wine to drink to those in sorrow"), which he understands to speak not of the kind of wine that causes drunkenness but of wine that "gladdens a human heart" (Ps. 103 [104]:15). And so he concludes the oration with a word of encouragement and hope: "Pledge each other in the liquor undiluted and with unstinted goblets of the word, that thus our grief may be turned to joy and gladness . . ."³²

In the oration for the young princess, Pulcheria, the tipping point comes much earlier on. After emotionally entering into the grief of the royal family and the rest of the congregation, Gregory presents his familiar contrast between reasoning and passion: "Now since reasoning has so clearly been defeated by passion, it may be time for the weary mind to regain, as much as possible, strength through the deliberation of reasoning."³³ Nyssen then moves to his customary quotation from 1 Thessalonians 4:13, followed by an extensive exposition on the benefits of life after death. Speaking of the resurrection of our nature to its ancient state, Gregory concludes that death is a "good," since it is the "beginning and the path of change toward the better."³⁴

A similar pattern emerges from St. Gregory's oration for Flacilla. After he has in many ways allowed for and even encouraged his congregation to grieve, he turns around halfway into the oration, explaining that as a physician, he is going to take the "evangelical treatment" from the Scriptures, in order to offer his hearers "consolation." Nyssen then proceeds to explain that the Empress has gone to "royal places," a kingdom whose innermost sanctuary one can enter only once the curtain of the flesh has been rent. In this oration, too, St. Gregory presents a number of biblical passages in support of his conviction that Flacilla is in a much better place now than she was before her death. Her soul has fled distress, grief, and groaning; while

³⁰ *Melet* 454 (NPNF II/5.516).

³¹ *Melet* 454 (NPNF II/5.516).

³² *Melet* 457 (NPNF II/5.517).

³³ *Pulcher* 464 (GNO IX).

³⁴ *Pulcher* 472 (GNO IX).

impassibility, blessedness, estrangement from evil, communion with angels, contemplation of invisible realities, and participation in God are hers forever. Nyssen concludes from this: “Now then, is it proper to grieve over the Empress, now that we have learnt that she has exchanged some things for others? She has abandoned an earthly kingdom, but has received the heavenly one; she has laid aside a crown of stones, but she has been crowned with that of glory; she has taken off the purple garment, but she has put on Christ.”³⁵

It is not that Gregory the theologian is at odds with Gregory the pastor. Rather, the pastor has the duty to take into account the theological problem of sin, which Gregory sees in the passion of grief that overshadows the hope of eternal life. He believes that it is his fundamental duty to comfort his congregation with the rational hope of the resurrection—a hope that is temporarily clouded as a result of grief. Just as Macrina, the “expert equestrian,” bridles Gregory with words and steers him with the bit of her reasoning, allowing him to vent his grief so as to let it run its course, so the Bishop himself bridles his congregation as it were with his oration.

Gregory’s approach may appear, in some respects, remarkably modern; it even evokes comparison with the primal therapy advocated by Arthur Janov and others.³⁶ Much like primal therapy tries to heal Pain (capitalized as it concerns emotions resulting from trauma that has long been repressed) by encouraging the patient imaginatively to go through the same traumatic experience again, this time giving full expression to the Pain that results, so Gregory depicts in lively fashion his congregation’s terrible loss and encourages them to express their horrific pain. There is some interesting overlap here between the psychological insights of Late Antiquity and of our contemporary society. Of course, the comparison has all sorts of limits. Most importantly, Nyssen’s purpose is quite different from that of primal therapy: the Cappadocian father’s reason for allowing people to lament their loss is his anticipation that once their mourning has exhausted itself, they will be open to the hope that the gospel offers. Gregory wants the passions to be depleted so that the message of hope can then be properly heard by the reasoning faculty. In this way, he tries to lead his audience to the same impassibility and absence of grief that he believes the departed loved ones have obtained already.

Once we have an eye for the complexity of Gregory’s approach to bereavement, it becomes possible to address contemporary apprehensions with regard to the traditional Christian view of bereavement. The fear is that the traditional understanding pits “reason” and “passion” over against each other, thereby delegitimizing grief and burdening those who suffer the loss of loved ones. This apprehension is not entirely out of place. It is indeed possible to use the traditional Platonist-Christian approach to disastrous pastoral effect. As we have seen from Gregory, however, such ill use is

³⁵ *Flacill* 486–87 (GNO IX).

³⁶ See Arthur Janov, *The Primal Scream* (New York: Dell, 1970).

not inevitable. Gregory himself—one the most Platonic thinkers among the fathers—certainly does not fall into this trap. Instead, he shows that it is possible to acknowledge and appropriate the tremendous power of grief without reifying or absolutizing it.

We also need to keep in mind that Gregory's cautious approach does not imply the rejection of every kind of grief. True, notwithstanding his pastoral sensitivity, he rejects as contrary to reason the kind of "worldly" grief that we go through when we experience a sense of loss, when we grieve because we miss our loved one who is no longer present with us here on earth. But Gregory does not reject the virgins' grief that stems from concern about their spiritual well being, now that Macrina, their teacher and guide, has left them. I suspect that Gregory might hold up in similarly positive fashion Jesus's weeping at Lazarus's grave in John 11. Throughout the episode, Jesus has been teaching about the resurrection, and when he weeps he is about to raise his friend from the dead. Thus, Jesus is unlikely to be weeping because he misses his friend, Lazarus. Jesus's grief is of a much deeper kind than ours: I suspect it is grief over Martha and Mary's incomprehension; it is grief over the lack of faith of several bystanders; and it is grief over the power that death, as the last enemy, still exercises. In short, Jesus grieves the power that sin and death still hold but that he has come to defeat. Perhaps we see something of Jesus's grief also in the virgins who bewail Macrina's death. Gregory *commends* their grief, since they were not "bemoaning the loss of some affection or bond according to the flesh" but were grieving at a much deeper level.³⁷

True, it would be wrongheaded to remove human reason from the purview of moral judgement would be problematic—though such an approach is by no means inherent in the viewpoint that reason ought to guide the emotions. But it seems to me at least as problematic to exempt the passions (such as grief) from moral evaluation. First, such an exemption would mean that we allow sociology to trump theology. It would involve treating our emotional life as a sequestered area, impervious to moral theological assessment. Such callous disregard of theology may be typical of the modern age, but a Christian approach to the emotional life cannot possibly accept it as authoritative. To insist that grief requires a normative moral theological context does not at all mean to downplay bodily and emotional experience in favour of the intellectual life. Rather, it is to recognize, along with Gregory, that the soul's reasoning faculty and the passions of the soul are intimately related and mutually affect one another.

Second, while our treatment of grief as a morally neutral emotion is motivated by a genuine attempt not to add a negative moral judgement to the already heavy load carried by those who mourn, such an approach has, in fact, the opposite result. Ironically, we effectively deprive the bereaved person from the genuine possibility of comfort. While we may still recognize that, as part of the "natural" course of events, somehow grief will sub-

³⁷ *Macr* (GNO VIII/1.400); Silvas 136.

side and acceptance will succeed the horrible experience of lament, the contents of our comfort no longer takes aim at the emotion of grief. After all, we have abandoned grief to its own autonomous place, and we view hope as simply what follows at the end of a dark tunnel; but in no way do we allow the contents of our hope to contradict the reasons for grief. The result is that “hope” turns vacuous—a well intended but ultimately meaningless gesture. Only when we have genuine hope on offer does it make sense to comfort those who mourn.

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