

# Step 7 on Mourning Which Causes Joy.

by St. John Climacus

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*Mourning is a spiritual practice that involves sadness of soul, spiritual confession, fasting, and tears, leading to spiritual growth, repentance, and humility.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 34:18, Psalm 51:17, Psalm 126:5, Proverbs 15:13, Ecclesiastes 7:3, Isaiah 53:3, Matthew 5:4, Romans 12:15, 2 Corinthians 7:10, James 4:9

**Topics:** "Repentance", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

St. John Climacus preaches about the importance of mourning, compunction, and repentance as essential steps in the spiritual journey towards God. He emphasizes the need for genuine tears and heartfelt sorrow as a means of cleansing the soul from sin and impurity. St. John Climacus also highlights the dangers of pride, luxury, and distractions that can hinder the path of mourning and lead to spiritual downfall. He encourages believers to cultivate a deep sense of humility, contrition, and constant vigilance in order to experience the transformative power of holy compunction and tears.

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## Transcript

1. Mourning, according to God, is sadness of soul, and the disposition of a sorrowing heart, which ever madly seeks that for which it thirsts; and when it fails in its quest, it painfully pursues it, and follows in its wake grievously lamenting. Or thus: mourning is a golden spur in a soul which is stripped of all attachment and of all ties, fixed by holy sorrow to watch over the heart.
2. Compunction is a perennial testing of the conscience which brings about the cooling of the fire of the heart through spiritual confession. And confession is a forgetfulness of nature, if anyone because of this really forgot to eat his bread.<sup>1</sup>
3. Repentance is the cheerful deprivation of every bodily comfort.
4. A characteristic of those who are still progressing in blessed mourning is temperance and silence of the lips, and of those who have made progress--freedom from anger and patient endurance of injuries; and of the perfect--humility, thirst for dishonours, voluntary craving for involuntary afflictions, non-condemnation of sinners, compassion even beyond one's strength. The first are acceptable, the second laudable; but blessed are those who hunger for hardship and thirst for dishonour, for they shall have their fill of the food that does not cloy.

5. If you possess the gift of mourning, hold on to it with all your might. For it is easily lost when it is not firmly established. And just as wax melts in the presence of fire, so it is easily dissolved by noise and bodily cares, and by luxury, and especially by talkativeness and levity.

6. Greater than baptism itself is the fountain of tears after baptism, even though it is somewhat audacious to say so. For baptism is the washing away of evils that were in us before, but sins committed after baptism are washed away by tears. As baptism is received in infancy, we have all defiled it, but we cleanse it anew with tears. And if God in His love for mankind had not given us tears, few indeed and hard to find would be those in a state of grace.<sup>2</sup>

7. Groanings and sorrows cry to the Lord. Tears shed from fear intercede for us; but tears of all-holy love show us that our prayer has been accepted.

8. If nothing goes so well with humility as mourning, certainly nothing is so opposed to it as laughter.

9. Keep a firm hold of the blessed joy-grief of holy compunction, and do not stop working at it until it raises you high above the things of this world and presents you pure to Christ.

10. Do not cease to picture and scrutinize the dark abyss of eternal fire, and the merciless servants, the unsympathetic and in exorable Judge, the bottomless pit of subterranean flame, the narrow descents to the awful underground chambers and yawning gulfs, and all such things, so that the sensuality in our soul may be checked by great terror and give place to incorruptible chastity, and itself receive the shining of the immaterial light which radiates beyond any fire.

11. During prayer and supplication stand with trembling like a convict standing before a judge, so that both by your outward appearance as well as by your inner disposition you may extinguish the wrath of the just Judge; for He will not despise a widow soul standing before Him burdened with sorrow and wearying the Unwearying One.<sup>3</sup>

12. He who has obtained heartfelt tears will find any place convenient for mourning. But he whose weeping is only outward show will spend endless time discussing places and manners. Just as hidden

1 Psalm ci, 5.

2 Lit. 'who are being saved'. 3 St. Luke xviii, 5.

treasure is safer from robbery than that exposed in the market, so let us apply this to what we have just said.

13. Do not be like those who in burying their dead first lament over them and then get drunk for their sake. But be like the prisoners in the mines who are flogged every hour by the gaolers.

14. He who sometimes mourns and sometimes indulges in luxury and laughter is like one who stones the dog of sensuality with bread. In appearance he is driving it away, but in fact he is encouraging it to be constantly with him.

15. Be concentrated without self-display, withdrawn into your heart. For the demons fear concentration as thieves fear dogs.

16. It is not to a wedding banquet that we have been called here--certainly not--but He who has called us has called us here to mourn for ourselves.

17. When they weep, some force themselves unseasonably to think of nothing at all during this blessed time, not realizing that tears without thought are proper only to an irrational nature and not to a rational one. Tears are the product of thought, and the father of thought is a rational mind.

18. Let your reclining in bed be for you an image of your declining into your grave--and you will sleep less. Let your refreshment at table be for you a reminder of the grim table of those worms--and you will be less luxurious. And in drinking water, do not forget the thirst of that flame--and you will certainly refuse your nature all it wants.

19. When we suffer from the Superior honourable dishonour, scolding or punishment, let us remember the fearful sentence of the Judge, and we shall kill with meekness and patience, as with a two-edged sword, the irrational sorrow and bitterness which will certainly be sown in us.

20. The sea wastes with time, as Job says.<sup>1</sup> And with time and patience the things of which we have spoken are gradually acquired and perfected in us.

21. Let the remembrance of the eternal fire lie down with you every evening, and let it rise with you too. Then sloth will never overwhelm you at the time of psalmody.

22. Let your very dress urge you to the work of mourning, because all who lament the dead are dressed in black. If you do not mourn, mourn for this cause. And if you mourn, lament still more that you have brought yourself down from a painless state to a painful one by your sins.

23. In the case of tears as in everything else our good and just Judge will certainly take into consideration the strength of our nature. For I have seen small tear-drops shed with difficulty like drops of blood, and I have also seen fountains of tears poured out without difficulty. And I judged those toilers more by their toil than by their tears, and I think that God does too.

24. Theology will not suit mourners, for it is of a nature to dissolve their mourning. For the theologian is like one who sits in a teacher's seat, whereas the mourner is like one who spends his days on a dung heap and in rags. That is why David, so I think, although he was a teacher and was wise, replied to those who questioned him when he was mourning: 'How shall I sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'<sup>2</sup> --that is to say, the land of passions.

25. Both in creation and in compunction there is that which moves itself and that which is moved by something else. When the soul becomes tearful, moist and tender without effort or trouble, then let us run, for the Lord has come uninvited, and is giving us the sponge of God-loving sorrow and the cool water of devout tears to wipe out the record of our sins. Guard these tears as the apple of your eye until

<sup>1</sup> Job xiv, ii.

<sup>2</sup> Another reading is: 'how shall we sing... (Cf. Psalm cxxxvi, 4.)

they withdraw. Great is the power of this compunction--greater than that which comes as a result of our effort and meditation.<sup>1</sup>

26. He who mourns when he wishes has not attained the beauty of mourning, but rather he who mourns on the subjects of his choice, and not even on these, but on what God wants. The ugly tears of vainglory are often interwoven with mourning which is pleasing to God. Acting devoutly, we shall find this out by experiment when we see ourselves mourning and still doing evil.

27. Genuine compunction is pain of soul shorn of all elation,<sup>2</sup> in which it gives itself no relief but hourly imagines only its dissolution; and it awaits, like cool water, the comfort of God who comforts humble monks.

28. Those who have obtained mourning in the depth of their being hate their own life as something painful and wearisome, and a cause of tears and sufferings; and they turn and flee from their body as from an enemy.

29. When we see anger and pride in those who seem to be mourning in a way pleasing to God, then their tears are to be regarded as a repugnant to God. For what fellowship has light with darkness?<sup>3</sup>

30. The fruit of morbid compunction is self-esteem, and the fruit of meritorious compunction is consolation.

31. Just as fire is destructive of straw, so are pure tears destructive of all material and spiritual impurity.

32. Many of the Fathers say that the question of tears, especially in the case of beginners, is an obscure matter and hard to ascertain, as tears are born in many different ways. For instance, there are tears from nature, from God, from adverse suffering, from praise worthy suffering, from vainglory, from licentiousness, from love, from the remembrance of death, and from many other causes.

33. Let us, stripped by the fear of God, train ourselves in all these ways, and acquire for ourselves pure and guileless tears over our dissolution. For there is no dissimulation or self-esteem in them, but on the contrary there is purification, progress in love for God, washing away of sin and the sublimation of the passions to dispassion.

34. It is not surprising if mourning begins with good tears and ends with bad. But it is praiseworthy if reprehensible and natural tears are sublimated to spiritual tears. People inclined to vainglory understand this problem clearly.

35. Do not trust your fountains of tears before your soul has been perfectly purified. For wine cannot be trusted when it is drawn straight from the vats.

36. No one will dispute that all our tears according to God are profitable. But we shall only know at the time of our death what the profit is.

37. He who wends his way in constant mourning according to God does not cease to feast daily; but eternal weeping awaits him who does not cease to feast bodily.

38. Convicts in prison have no joy or delight, and true monks have no feast on earth. Perhaps that is why that excellent mourner, sighing, said: 'Bring my soul out of prison<sup>4</sup> that it may rejoice henceforward in Thy ineffable light.'

39. Be like a king in your heart, seated high in humility, and commanding laughter: Go, and it goes; and sweet weeping: Come, and it comes; and our tyrant and slave, the body: Do this, and it does it.<sup>1</sup>

1 Note in this paragraph the difference between ascetical and mystical activity. 2 Or, 'unwavering pain of soul'.

3 2 Corinthians vi, 14.

4 Psalm cxli, 8.

40. He who is clothed in blessed and grace-given mourning as in a wedding garment knows the spiritual laughter of the soul.

41. Can anyone be found who has spent all his days in the monastic life so piously that he has never lost a day, or hour, or moment, but has spent all his time for the Lord, bearing in mind that never in your life can you see the same day twice?

42. Blessed is the monk who can lift up the eyes of his soul to the spiritual powers. But he is truly safe from falling who from the remembrance of sin and death constantly moistens his cheeks with living waters from his bodily eyes. And it is not hard for me to believe that the second condition leads on to the first.

43. I have seen shameless petitioners and beggars with clever words soon incline even the hearts of kings to compassion. And I have seen men poor and needy in virtue, with words not clever but rather humble, vague and stumbling, call shamelessly and persistently from the depths of a desperate heart upon the Heavenly King and by their violence force His inviolable nature and compassion.<sup>2</sup>

44. . He who in his heart is proud of his tears, and secretly condemns those who do not weep, is like a man who asks the king for a weapon against his enemy, and then commits suicide with it.

45. My friends, God does not ask or desire that man should mourn from sorrow of heart, but rather that out of love for Him he should rejoice with spiritual laughter. Remove sin, and the tear of sorrow is superfluous for your eyes of sense. What is the use of a bandage when there is no wound? Before his transgression, Adam had no tears, just as there will be none after the resurrection when sin will be abolished; for pain, sorrow and sighing will then have fled away.<sup>3</sup>

46. In some I have seen mourning, and in others I have seen mourning for lack of mourning. Though having it, they are as if they were without it. And through this splendid ignorance they remain inviolate; and of them it is said: The Lord makes wise the blind.<sup>4</sup>

47. Tears often lead frivolous people to pride, and that is why they are not given to some. And such people, seeking tears in vain, consider themselves unfortunate, and condemn themselves to sighing, lamentation, sorrow of soul, deep grief and utter dismay. All of which, though profitably regarded by them as nothing, can safely take the place of tears.

48. If we watch carefully we shall often find a bitter joke played on us by the demons. For when we are full they stir us up to compunction, and when we are fasting they harden our heart so that, being deceived by spurious tears, we may give ourselves up to indulgence which is the mother of passions. We must not listen to them but rather do the opposite.

49. When I consider the actual nature of compunction I am amazed at how that which is called mourning and grief should contain joy and gladness interwoven within it like honey in the comb. What then are we to learn from this? That such compunction is in a special sense a gift of the Lord. There is then in the soul no

pleasureless pleasure, for God consoles those who are contrite in heart in a secret way. But as an inducement to most splendid mourning and profitable sorrow, let us hear a soul- profiting and most pitiful story.

50. There lived here a certain Stephen who had embraced an eremitic and solitary life, and had spent many years in the monastic training. His soul was especially adorned with tears and fasting, and was bedecked with other good achievements. He had a cell on the slope of this holy mountain where the holy prophet and seer Elijah once lived. But later this famous man resolved upon a more effective, austere and stricter repentance, and went to a place of hermits called Siddim. There he spent several

1 St. Matthew viii, 9.

2 Cf. St. Matthew xi, II; St. Luke xvi, i6.

3 Isaiah xxxv, 10. Cf. Apocrypha vii, 17; xxi, 4. 4 Psalm cxlv, 8.

years in a life of great austerity. This place was bereft of every comfort, and was almost untrodden by the foot of man, being about seventy miles from the fort.<sup>1</sup> Towards the end of his life the elder returned to his cell on the holy mountain where he had two extremely pious disciples from Palestine who took care of the elder's cell. Having passed a few days there he fell into the illness from which he died. On the day before his death, he went into ecstasy of mind and with open eyes he looked to the right and left of his bed and, as if he were being called to account by someone, in the hearing of all the bystanders he said: 'Yes indeed, that is true; but that is why I fasted for so many years.' And then again: 'Yes, it is quite true; but I wept and served the brethren.' And again: 'No, you are slandering me.' And sometimes he would say: 'Yes, it is true. Yes, I do not know what to say to this. But in God there is mercy.' And it was truly an awful and horrible sight--this in visible and merciless inquisition. And what was most terrible, he was accused of what he had not done. How amazing! Of several of his sins the hesychast and hermit said: 'I do not know what to say to this,' although he had been a monk for nearly forty years and had the gift of tears. Alas, alas! Where was then the voice of Ezekiel to say to the tormentor: 'As I find you, I will judge you, says God.'<sup>2</sup> Truly he could not say anything of the sort. Why? Glory to Him who alone knows! And some, as before the Lord, told me that he even fed a leopard from his hand<sup>3</sup> in the desert. And while being thus called to account he was parted from his body, leaving us in uncertainty as to his judgment, or end, or sentence, or how the trial ended.

51. Just as a widow bereft of her husband and having an only son finds in him her sole comfort after the Lord, so for a soul that has fallen there is no other consolation at the time of its departure but the toils of fasting and tears.

52. People like that never sing, nor do they shout loudly to themselves in songs, because such things dissipate mourning. And if you hope to summon it by such means, then you are a long way from achieving your aim. For mourning is the characteristic pain of a soul on fire.

53. In many people mourning has been the precursor of blessed dispassion, and it prepared, ploughed, and got rid of sinful matter.

54. One skilled practiser of this virtue told me: 'Frequently, as soon as I tried to surrender myself to vanity, or anger, or over-eating, the thought of mourning protested within me and said: "Do not be vain, or I shall leave you." And so too, at the urge of other passions. And I would say to the thought: "I shall never

disobey you until you present me to Christ."

55. The abyss of mourning has seen comfort, and purity of heart has received illumination. Illumination is an ineffable activity which is unknowingly perceived and invisibly seen. Comfort is the solace of a sorrowing soul which, like a child, at once both whimpers to itself and shouts happily. Divine intervention is the renewal of a soul depressed by grief which in a wonderful way transforms painful tears into painless ones.

56. Tears over our departure produce fear; and when fear begets fearlessness, joy dawns. And when joy is unfailingly obtained, holy love bursts into flower.

57. Drive away with the hand of humility every transitory joy, as being unworthy of it, lest by readily admitting it you receive a wolf instead of a shepherd.

58. Do not hasten to contemplation when it is not time for contemplation, that it may pursue and embrace the beauty of your humility, and unite with you for ever in immaculate marriage.

59. As soon as a baby begins to recognize its father, it is all filled with joy. But if the father goes away for a time on business and then comes home again, the child becomes full of joy and sorrow--joy at seeing the beloved, and sorrow at being deprived for so long of that fair beauty. And a mother

1 See above, p. 37, note 143.

2 Cf. Ezekiel xxxiii, 13--20. This 'unwritten saying' of Christ is recorded by St. Justin (Dial. 47). 3 Another reading is: 'reared a leopard by hand'.

sometimes hides herself from her child, and when she sees with what sorrow it seeks her, she is delighted; for thus she teaches it to be attached to her for ever, and fans the flame of its love for her. He who has ears to hear, let him hear, says the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

60. A condemned man, who has heard the death sentence, will not worry about how theatres are managed. So too, he who is truly lamenting will never return to luxury, or glory, or anger, or irritability. Mourning is the characteristic sorrow of a penitent soul who adds sorrow to sorrow, as a woman suffers when she bears a child.

61. Just and holy is the Lord.<sup>2</sup> He leads him who is reasonably silent into reasonable compunction, and He daily gladdens him who is reasonably submissive. But he who does not practise rightly one of these two ways is deprived of mourning.

62. Drive away the hell-dog that comes at the time of your deepest mourning, and suggests that God is not merciful or compassionate. For if you watch it, you will find that before the sin he calls God loving, compassionate and forgiving.

63. Practice<sup>3</sup> produces habit, and perseverance grows into a feeling of the heart; and what is done with an ingrained feeling of the heart is not easily eradicated.

64. However great may be the life we lead, if we have not acquired a contrite heart we may count it stale and spurious. For this is essential, truly essential if I may say so, for those who have again been defiled after baptism that they should cleanse the pitch from their hands with unceasing fire of heart and with the oil of God.

65. I have seen some who had attained to the last degree of mourning; for I saw them literally pouring out of their mouths the blood of a suffering and wounded heart. And I remembered him who said: 'I am cut down like grass, and my heart is withered.'<sup>4</sup>

66. Tears caused by fear bring protection with them. But tears produced by love which has not attained perfection, as may happen in the case of some, are easily stolen away. Unless perhaps the memory of the eternal fire, at the times of its effective influence, should kindle the heart. And it is surprising how much safer is the humbler way in its season.

67. There are material substances which dry the fountains of our tears, and there are others which give birth to mud and reptiles in them. From the former Lot had illicit intercourse with his daughters, and from the latter the devil fell from heaven.<sup>5</sup>

68. Our enemies are so wicked that they turn even the mothers of virtues into the mothers of vices, and those things which make for humility, they make into a cause for pride. Frequently the very setting and sight of our dwellings are of a nature to rouse our mind to compunction. Let Jesus, Elijah and John who prayed alone convince you of this. I have often seen tears provoked in cities and crowds to make us think that crowds do us no harm and so draw nearer to the world. For this is the aim of the evil spirits.

69. One word has often dispelled mourning. But it would be a wonder indeed if one word brought it back.

70. When our soul leaves this world we shall not be blamed for not having worked miracles, or for not having been theologians or contemplatives. But we shall certainly have to give an account to God of why we have not unceasingly mourned.

1 St. Luke xiv, 35.

2 Psalm cxliv, 18.

3 I.e. practice of mourning.

4 Psalm ci, 5.

5 Genesis xix, 30--8. 'Materials' that dry up tears are wine and food taken to excess, while honours, power and

authority are fuel for pride.

This is the seventh step. May he who has been found worthy of it help me too; for he himself has already been helped, since through this seventh step he has washed away the stains of this world.

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