

Sadness/Grieving

For Evagrius, there are two types of sadness or grieving.

Appropriate Sadness/Grieving

It is not wrong to be sad or grieve over the loss of a person whom one loved.

- Jesus, for example, was deeply moved and wept when he saw the grief of Mary after her brother Lazarus had died (Jn. 11:33-35). Love moved him to weep (11:36).
- Neither was it wrong for Mary Magdalene to weep at the tomb of Jesus (Jn. 20:11). Again love for Jesus moved her to weep.

This kind of grief is fitting and appropriate and reflects rightly ordered love.

- This grief is able to remember the good things in the other person's life, good things we loved and enjoyed as the gift of God.
- Godly sadness can remember God and the good things one received from God.

But not every form of sadness or grieving is like this.

Inappropriate Sadness/Grieving

There are forms of sadness and grieving that are disordered and reflect immoderate and sinful attachments to things.

For Evagrius, sadness becomes a problem when it starts with *frustration* and ends in *fixation*.

- This kind of sadness starts with a frustrated desire, i.e. one wanted something and failed to get it and then worries obsessively about not being able to have it (*Vic. 4; Praktikos 10, 19*).
 - Sadness (*lupe*) arises from the concupiscible part or the irascible part when any desire is frustrated (*Eul. 7; Sinkewicz, xxviii*).
 - As a result, the monk will fall into a state of continued grieving or sorrow over something or someone he cannot attain. This points to an important truth about sinful sadness: Sadness has no power in itself unless the other passions are present (*8 Th. 5.9*). In other words, sadness, is simply the frustration of a prior desire; the previous desire is what gives ongoing force to unbalanced, inconsolable sadness.
 - Though sadness can arise from a multitude of different situations, the underlying theme in each situation is twofold: an inability to carry out one's own plan and then a feeling of distrust toward God (*Vic. 4*).
 - One was angry and wanted revenge but was unable to obtain it (*8Th. 5.1*).
 - Sadness often follows after anger and, consumed by a sense of injustice and frustration, one can think only of the revenge ("justice") one does not have.

- This can increase one's feeling of having been wronged, which in turn makes one even more resentful and angry (cf. *Refl.* 43).
 - In other cases, one indulged in anger/vengeance but this didn't bring the expected satisfaction but only created regret (*Praktikos* 25).
- Sadness also commonly follows from avarice or vainglory (desire for visible honor): One wanted a certain pleasure or honor and was not able to experience it or receive it (*8Th.* 5.12). Or one thinks of the material things or the honor one once had while living in a worldly way, but now does not have, and one regrets having given up those things (*8 Th.* 3.7).
 - A greedy (avaricious) person wanted to gain a certain thing and failed to get it or keep it (*8Th.* 5.17). Sadness often arises from an unhealthy attachment to one's possessions (*Fnd.* 5).
 - A person suffering from vainglory wanted to be honored and approved by others but instead received an exasperated or insulting word and was immoderately grieved by it and continues to dwell on it and hold on to it with sad thoughts (*8Th.* 3.6-7; *Praktikos* 13; *Mn.* 61).
 - Sometimes sadness can follow from pride (when one is frustrated that one cannot be the source of one's own good) (*Praktikos* 14).
 - Sadness can also follow from acedia. Acedia and sadness are so closely related that Evagrius often mentions them together (cf. Bunge, *Despondency*, 135); see, for example, *Vic.* 6, where Evagrius describes acedia as a "companion of sadness." In the *Antirrhetikos*, Evagrius ties sadness and acedia very closely together because in many ways they produce each other and feed off of each other, if left unchecked by prayer and psalmody (cf. Bunge, 70; *8Th.* 6.17).
 - One feature that is common to acedia and sadness is a *lack of action* and an inability to return to healthy, diverse patterns of movement and engagement.

Because this kind of sadness often follows anger or acedia, there is a great deal of energy being unleashed and applied within the soul.

At the same time, the soul (due to anger or acedia) has cast off all measures or boundaries and has lost any broader perspective.

All this energy becomes focused on oneself and the agitation of not having the thing one wants. This results in *fixation*.

- One's focus narrows down to the one thing one does not have and cannot acknowledge or take pleasure in anything else (*8Th. 5.5; Th. 12*).
 - One is obsessed with getting some tangible thing (or achieving some picture of tangible things) that one cannot look away from or leave (*8Th. 3.6-7*). The struggle to have this thing (and the pain one feels in not having it) define one and take up much of one's energy, so that less is left for anything else and anyone else. (It takes away the normal patterns of movement and engagement.)
 - Cf. *8Th. 5.23*: "The sunrise is pleasant for all people, but the soul caught in sadness takes scant pleasure even in this."
 - Cf. *Refl. 51*: "Pleasure follows every thought except for thoughts of sadness."
- Because one is fixated upon the thing one does not have, one cannot focus on prayer or other higher goods (*8Th. 5.6; Mn. 56; Th. 36*).
 - *Refl. 61*: "Alone among the thoughts, those of sadness are destructive of all other thoughts."
 - There are two fundamental ways that worldly sadness hinders prayer
 - First, sadness involves a frustration that prevents one from experiencing pleasure (*8 Th. 5.4*; compare *Refl. 51*). Because the person is frustrated and will not to take pleasure in anything other than what is missing, they cannot take any pleasure in God. God seems unworthy of their attention and the person has no hope or confidence in God, cannot find any satisfaction in him, or feel any reverence for him. They are sad because God does not want what they want.
 - The thing one does not have becomes an ultimate good
 - something one is bound to and
 - one's mind keeps going back to
 - One needs that thing to be secure, safe, well, whole, satisfied with life and oneself.
 - Excessive concern about losses or harms to oneself or to another person can lead to sadness and from sadness to anxiety or hatred (*Eul. 28.30; Th. 28*).
 - Second, images of others in danger arise in one's mind and distract from prayer (*Thoughts 36*).
 - Sometimes the frustration in sadness leads to anxiety and agitation. Because one cannot admit that one's agitation is because of a fixation on one thing, one's anxiety and agitation gets projected off the thing onto other people. Thus, pictures arise in the mind of people one knows being exposed to dangers while they are away from home or while they are traveling (cf. *Refl. 40; Eul. 28.30; Thoughts 28*).

For these reasons, Evagrius says that "The spirit of sadness crushes prayer" (*Monks 56*). This strikes to the heart of the Christian life, since entrusting oneself to God through prayer is the best way to deal with the discouragements and disappointments that lead to sadness.

“Thoughts of sadness are destructive of all the other thoughts” (*Refl.* 61)

If a remedy is not sought, sadness will consume the monk and send him headlong into acedia and eventually into madness (Bunge, *Despondency*, 135). In this state, sadness born of frustrated desire can find no rest or comfort; as one’s unhappiness increases, one will increasingly lash out at God and other people.

- Cf. Cassian on sadness (*tristitia*): “[This sadness] does not allow it [the mind] to say its prayer with the usual gladness of heart, nor permit it to rely on the comfort of reading the sacred writings, nor suffer it to be quiet and gentle with the brethren; it makes it rough and impatient in all the duties of work and devotion.”
- A bitter, hateful sadness leads to cynicism and one increasingly feels justified in making others feel pained or miserable (misery loves company).

For Evagrius, one cannot make any progress until one repents of one’s fixation and confesses that the thing one wants is not the ultimate thing. In one’s grief, one loses the truth. One must give up the idea that everything hangs on this one thing (or the pleasure this one thing can bring: *Exh.* 1.5).

- To pray is already to recognize that there is more to life than this one thing and puts God back into his proper place (*Pr.* 16)
- To give thanks (express gratitude) to God for the things one does have (even the small, ordinary things) can begin to redirect the soul away from its previous fixation on one tangible thing and turn its focus back to God (cf. *Eul.* 7.7; *Vic.* 4), which opens the way to finding joy and gladness in God, which brings lasting peace.
 - To recognize and be thankful for God’s action works against sadness in two ways.
 - First, it rejects the lie (often central to sadness) that matters are hopeless when they are beyond one’s own power and what one’s immediate circumstances can offer, instead recognizing God’s presence and action.
 - Second, gratitude is a way of accepting things from God and seeing his goodwill toward us; this opposes the lie that I can have nothing good and can find no comfort (do not want to be comforted) until I get the thing I am fixated upon.
- To do some small act of love directed toward God (or directed toward the neighbor, who is loved by God) also helps to break the spell of inward fixation on loss (cf. *Eul.* 5; *8 Th.* 5.24 and compare *Max.* 3.7 “If you wish to be free of sadness, be zealous in pleasing God”).

Sadness is contrasted and opposed by love, which looks beyond oneself to God and others (*Eul.* 5.5; *8Th.* 5.24).

- Love is different than the worldly desires that cause sadness. Love does not come and go when one is temporarily separated from something (cf. *8Th.* 5.25)
- Where anger and a frustrated desire for revenge has produced sadness, the force of anger and sadness can be weakened by a willingness to extend forgiveness and ask forgiveness.

Questions for Class Discussion:

Since for Evagrius, sinful sadness=frustration + fixation, how would we recognize fixation?

How would we recognize when a desire for something had become a fixation and a sign of sinful sadness?

Two Case Studies:

(1) Darla Wilkinson (<https://www.reviveourhearts.com/true-woman/blog/if-god-loves-me-why-am-i-not-married/>):

“Hindsight really is 20/20. Looking back on my single adult years, I wanted to be a model of grace and patience, trusting God every step of the way. But I wasn’t. Not even close.

I married just before turning thirty-three. That’s an eternity to some, a drop in the bucket to others. But it was longer than I expected to be on my own. And for large portions of those years I was plagued by angst, sadness and distrust.

Sure, on the outside I looked good. I faithfully served my church, even moving 3,500 miles away for vocational ministry. But inside I wanted more. I wanted someone to cherish me above anyone else. Many nights I cried myself to sleep.

A big reason I missed out on God’s peace and joy during my singleness was because I believed a lie. At the time I couldn’t describe it. But deep down, I felt God didn’t notice me, hear me, or love me because He wasn’t giving me my greatest desire. It was a message straight from the father of lies, and I swallowed it hook, line, and sinker.”

(2) Burrell David Dinkins, *Narrative Pastoral Counseling* (Xulon Press, 2005), 87:

“Christy continued to cry two years after the death of her husband. She received plenty of sympathy and was almost addicted to people taking care of her. Her husband’s insurance settlement was enough to give her a reason not to work.”

[The counselor notices that the client is “stuck” in a pattern that prevents her from receiving consolation or making progress. The counselor suspects that guilt is at the root of this and is preventing the client from being able to look at the situation in other ways. The counselor picks up on something the client says and suggests that in some ways her life has improved since the death of her husband.]

“She became very angry at my suggestion that her life had improved since her husband’s death. This re-interpretation of her story caused her to reflect upon the radical changes in her life that led her to seek counseling.”

[The client begins to reframe the story in a way that takes account of other facts and feelings and allows her to deal truthfully with guilt and make progress.]

“She poured out her story about how unhappy she had been in the marriage, often wishing something would happen to her husband! She didn’t have the courage to divorce him, but when death brought the fulfillment of her wishes, she became trapped in her guilt. The best way to disguise her guilty feelings (even to herself) was to cry. At least this provided sympathy from friends and family members. She vowed not to be happy again. She was stuck in her own sad ending of a marriage. She told only the good parts of the story of her marriage and denied the painful abusive aspects of the story. When she finally told the story of the painful experiences of her marriage and expressed her feelings of remorse and regret by writing letters to her deceased husband her crying ceased and she found relief in her grief.”