

PRINCIPLES

FROM CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

St. Thomas Aquinas on the Five Remedies for Sorrow



MATT FRADD

NO MATTER HOW GOOD WE HAVE IT, no matter how wealthy we are, or how many good friends we have, or even how holy we are, all of us will experience sorrow in this life. A couple of years into my marriage when my wife, newborn child, and I were living in Ireland, I experienced a great deal of sorrow. I was never diagnosed as having depression, but the symptoms were similar to what other depressed people experience. Sometimes it felt like I had a mournful weight hanging around my neck. For many people, the sorrows we experience in this life can feel so overwhelming that we think we might break. Fortunately, St. Thomas Aquinas has several excellent insights into what causes sorrow and what we can do to endure it on our path back to the joy God ultimately desires for us.

WHAT CAUSES SORROW?

Aquinas, following St. John Damascene, lists pity, anxiety, envy, and torpor as the species of sorrow. Pity is the sorrow we feel at another person's misfortune. Even if a misfortune does not happen to us, we can still feel sad because we empathize with the person who is suffering. If they are a friend or family member, the pain can intensify because we find it easier to "be in their shoes." Pity is not a bad thing if it moves

About the Author



Matt Fradd is the author and coauthor of several books, including *Does God Exist? A Socratic Dialogue on the Five Ways of Thomas Aquinas* as well as the creator and host of the *Pints with Aquinas* podcast. Matt earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees in philosophy from Holy Apostles College & Seminary, which also awarded him an honorary doctorate. He lives in Steubenville, Ohio, with his wife Cameron and their four kids.

us to compassion, but it can be bad if it leads us to find our happiness in other people’s misfortune (what the Germans call *Schadenfreude*) or to despair for others, thinking they are beyond any hope for salvation in either this life or the next.

When it comes to anxiety, Aquinas quotes St. John Damascene, who summarizes the essence of it well: “the dreaded evil gives rise to fear, the present evil is the cause of sorrow.”¹ When we worry about something negative that might happen to us in life, we feel afraid, but when the bad thing hits us like a ton of bricks, it is then that we feel profound sadness or sorrow. About one-third of people struggle with constant anxiety. It can be a breeding ground for fear because we increasingly feel “boxed in,” trapped by threats or hardships in this life. On the other hand, anxiety can bring us sorrow as we mourn the existential cage of worry that has taken away our joy. Aquinas

describes anxiety, therefore, as that “which weighs on the mind, so as to make escape seem impossible.”²

Envy is related to the sin of pride because our desire to be esteemed by others can only seem to be satisfied if we have that which we esteem in them. And if we can’t have that, we end up hating our neighbor for being better than us. Envy brings with it, as St. Gregory tells us, “hatred, whispering, detraction, exultation at the misfortunes of a neighbor, and affliction at his prosperity.” Gregory writes that envy whispers to us seductive questions like, “In what art thou inferior to this or that person? Why then art thou not either equal or superior to them? What greater things art thou able to do, which they are not able to do! They ought not then to be either superior or even equal to thyself.”³ Ultimately, Aquinas describes envy as “sorrow at another’s good.”⁴

Finally, Aquinas uses a word you might not have heard before



Thomas Aquinas refutes heretics, Santa Maria Novella Dominican Church in Florence.

but almost certainly have felt: torpor. He writes that you feel torpor “if . . . the mind be weighed down so much, that even the limbs become motionless.”⁵ Torpor is a sluggishness we feel when we’re sorrowful. While anxiety makes our nervous minds feel like a pinball machine, torpor turns them into the ruminations of a tree sloth that seem to take forever to move. Sadness in this case makes us tired, lethargic, and unwilling to do anything because we ask, “What’s the point?” Aquinas says that “sorrow is a kind of flight or withdrawal, while pleasure is a kind of pursuit or approach; just as pleasure regards first the good possessed, as its proper object, so sorrow regards the evil that is present.”⁶ In order to counteract these sorrows, Aquinas recommends five treatments that keep us from destructively turning inward. They orient us to some good that we can pursue, leading us to relief and eventually, a return

to happiness. Specifically, Aquinas recommends pleasure, tears, friends, contemplation, and my favorites: sleep and baths.

FEELING BAD AND FEELING GOOD

I know it sounds obvious, but if you are enduring some hardship and you feel deep sorrow, then pleasure or feeling good can be a suitable remedy. Aquinas says, “Pleasure is a kind of repose of the appetite in a suitable good; while sorrow arises from something unsuited to the appetite. Consequently, in movements of the appetite pleasure is to sorrow, what, in bodies, repose is to weariness.”⁷ In other words, sometimes our sadness can be rooted in a thirst for pleasure. Just as sleep is the antidote to fatigue, pleasure can be the antidote to sorrow.

In many cases, we’ve poured ourselves too much into work, school, family, and even religious observances, and have not left anything for leisure. The twentieth-century Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper wrote a great book on leisure where he said, “Leisure is only possible when we are at one with ourselves. Possession of the beloved, St. Thomas holds, takes place in an act of cognition, in seeing, in intuition, in contemplation.”⁸ Now, Aquinas is not saying you should become a hedonist who washes away his sorrows with whatever you find in Vegas and think will stay in Vegas. We must make a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate pleasures; that is, pleasures that give us repose and refreshment from sorrow by invigorating our souls and pleasures that just distract and discourage us. We’ve all had the



experience of getting something unhealthy to eat, falling onto the couch, and spending hours on end watching mindless entertainment. It may be distracting for a while, but when you're done, would you say you feel really refreshed? Or, to provide another example, scrolling through your Facebook feed or your Twitter feed for twenty minutes is not going to restore you. That's just the digital equivalent of raiding the snack pantry. So, what are some activities you can engage in that can give you legitimate pleasure? For me, it would be going on a date night with my wife. It would be spending some time in silence, reading. For you, it might be different, and Aquinas admits that pleasure depends "on the part of the disposition of the subject, [so] any sorrow can be assuaged by any pleasure."⁹ Once again, this is not a license to do whatever you want, but permission to indulge in the unique, legitimate goods that make you happy, even if they aren't everyone else's cup of tea.

TEARS OF JOY

Sometimes we are hit with something really difficult, like a severe medical diagnosis or the loss of a loved one. We can't just go on a walk or have a good bottle of wine to make those sorrows disappear. In the face of these trials, do not be afraid to cry. Aquinas says there are two reasons this helps. First, "a hurtful thing hurts yet more if we keep it shut up."¹⁰ (I love that he says this because my mum said that to me when I was five.) So, don't keep the pain shut up inside. Have a good cry. Groan about it.

I think for many of us, maybe we've forgotten how to cry because we've gotten the impression that it's somehow a shameful thing (especially for men). But it isn't. Maybe spend some time alone listening to some beautiful music. Allow yourself to feel your feelings and don't be afraid to cry. It's almost as if when we cry, that pain, if you want to think of it in a material sense, dissipates through our tears. This might be explained by the fact that tears shed because of emotional pain cause the brain to release oxytocin, endorphins, and other chemicals that are associated with the dulling of pain and the elevation of moods. Biochemist William Frey has even shown that emotional tears contain more proteins than "irritant tears," or tears caused by things like onions.¹¹

The second reason Aquinas says we shouldn't be afraid to cry or groan is "because an action, that befits a man according to his actual disposition, is always pleasant to him."¹² In other words, if we're feeling really down, and we have to put on a happy face for people, we don't like that. It's not a pleasing thing. We like to be able to express on the outside what we're feeling on the inside. Remember, sometimes God gives us suffering for the express purpose of perfecting us. It's okay to let God know that it is a tough proposition. St. Paul tells us, "To keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated." We don't know if this "thorn" was a person or possibly an ailment,



St. Thomas Aquinas, detail of the façade of the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence.

but Paul does tell us, “Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Cor 12:7–9). So, if you’re carrying a heavy burden right now, don’t be afraid to cry and to groan and to turn to our Lord in that crying and groaning and say, “Lord, be my refuge. Be my shelter.” St. Peter even tells us, “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you” (1 Pet 5:6–7).

A FRIEND LIKE ME

The third remedy Aquinas recommends to alleviate our sorrow is turning to good friends. First, the pain that we experience often feels like a weight, and when we see somebody share that pain with us by being compassionate (meaning co-passio, to suffer along with), it alleviates that burden.

Secondly, Aquinas says that when we see the sympathy of our friends, we know that they love us

and this brings us pleasure. I think that because of social media, we have this idea that we can somehow have one hundred or two hundred or one thousand friends. That’s just not true. The British anthropologist Robin Dunbar believes that human beings only have enough brainpower to juggle relationships with 150 people. This does not mean we can have 150 best friends but 150 people we interact with regularly, like coworkers, classmates, family members, and friends. Dunbar further says that we devote two-thirds of our social time to an “inner core” of fifteen people, five of whom get 40 percent of our social time. (Personally, I think you can only have about three close friends, but maybe that’s just me—I’m envious of people who have a dozen of them.)

We should remember, of course, that among our friends many of them are going through sorrows right now. They may even be keeping them secret in order to maintain “pleasantries” with us. When is the last time that

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we've given them a call? Maybe we should call them today just to check in and see how they're doing. It demands a certain type of heroism to continually journey with someone who is struggling with depression or some sort of cross, because it can be wearying being with somebody who is continually suffering and continually telling us about their suffering. I think it does demand a type of heroism, not just to be there for the short term, but to consistently reach out to this person, to invite them out for a drink or to show them love, to allow them to share with you. I love what St. Paul says in his Letter to the Galatians: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal 6:1-2).

CONTEMPLATING JOY

You and I are not merely animals, so we should not be seeking pleasure in the same way dogs and horses do, namely, through food or sex. We can certainly find these things to be pleasurable, but we can find even deeper pleasures when we use the rational abilities God gave us. We

can raise our minds to understand the true, the good, the beautiful, and ultimately God Himself, who is Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.

Aquinas says intellectual pleasures are greater than bodily pleasures. I would have asked him, "Yes, but have you ever surfed in San Diego?" Obviously, I'm joking because I know the most beautiful experiences in my own life have come in the form of some prayer and it is in that spiritual vision that I've seen things of far more importance than I ever have with my physical eyes. For example, in his discussion of pleasure, Aquinas recalls Augustine's observation that most people, given the choice between blindness or insanity, would pick blindness. We'd rather have our intellectual vision even at the cost of our bodily vision. Deep down we know that pleasures that penetrate the soul yield more joy than fleeting ones we sense in the body. There is a momentary powerful joy of catching a nice wave, but there is a supreme, lasting joy that comes from acquiring the knowledge of surfing and knowing this is a part of your very being. There have been times when I have lain on my surfboard, looked up to the sky, and said, "How good

you are, God. How good you are for creating oceans and suns in all their beauty. How amazing it is that they faintly radiate your beauty!”

SLEEP IT OFF

The final antidote to sorrow Aquinas recommends is sleep and baths. Isn't that the best answer anyone has ever given you?

Aquinas quotes St. Ambrose, saying, “Sleep restores the tired limbs to labor, refreshes the weary mind, and banishes sorrow.”¹³ Against the objection that sorrow is in the soul whereas baths affect the body, Thomas replies, “The normal disposition of the body, so far as it is felt, is itself a cause of pleasure, and consequently assuages sorrow.” The body is not a costume our souls wear on earth. It is a vital part of us

and when it isn't functioning, that can have detrimental effects on the soul. It's ironic that in a time when we have more labor-saving devices than anyone else in human history, we are still so tired because we feel an incessant need to fill up our days and weeks with “stuff,” lest we feel bored. In fact, one in three U.S. adults does not get at least seven hours of sleep a night.

So, you might decide tonight to turn off all your electronics by 5:00 p.m. Don't have any more coffee after 5:00 p.m. If you are of age, have a large glass of red wine, have a hot bath, and have a good night's sleep. And when you wake up in the morning, offer your first thoughts to our God. Praise Him because He is good, praise Him because He loves you, and then maybe reach out to a friend who's not doing so well and remind him or her of the goodness of God. **P**

“Five Remedies for Sorrow” is adapted with permission from Matt Fradd's book *How to Be Happy: St. Thomas' Secret to a Good Life*, recently published by Emmaus Road Publishing of the St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology.

FOOTNOTES:

1. ST I-II, q. 36, a. 1.
2. ST I-II, q. 35, a. 8.
3. St. Gregory, *Moralia in Job*, §90. Available online at <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity03/Gregorymoralia2.html>
4. ST II-II, q. 36, a. 1.
5. ST I-II, q. 35, a. 8.
6. ST I-II, q. 36, a. 1.
7. ST I-II, q. 38, a. 1.
8. Josef Pieper, *Happiness & Contemplation* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 63.
9. ST I-II, q. 38, a. 1.
10. ST I-II, q. 38, a. 2.
11. William Frey, *Crying: The Mystery of Tears* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 44.
12. ST I-II, q. 38, a. 2.
13. ST I-II, q. 38, a. 5.

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PRODUCTION MANAGER

Adam Wilson

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Niall O'Donnell

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