A LITURGY FOR

The Loss of a Child

The loss of a child is a grief more deep and complex than a single prayer could ever articulate. The following prayer, limited in scope, is offered in hopes that it might serve as a humble frame for a broader conversation between a bereaved parent and their Creator. The prayer is divided into sections so those who pray through it might more easily skip portions not relevant to their own experience. It is also compartmentalized so that between sections petitioners might pause in contemplative silence or add their own prayers.

May God’s mercies be manifest to all who find need to pray these words. May his Spirit strengthen you in your deep sorrow. May the Christ meet you, sharing and transforming your sufferings from within.

O God, my God!
O child, my child!

Sometimes there are no words.

II

Silence is kept.

III

O God who sees my suffering,
I care little now
what becomes of me—
whether I prosper or diminish.
I only want to hold my child again.

And all of life is hammered thin upon
the anvil of these hard questions:

Why?
and What now?

Why?
and What now?

Silence is kept.

IV

If I had seen the end from the beginning,
O my child, I would have been a more attentive
student of your eyes, of the wondering play of sunlight on your skin, of every bell ring of your laughter, of every rivulet of your tears.

I would have kept vigil in midnights to watch you as you slept, savoring the sound of every exhaled breath, leaning in to catch the pilgrim song your life was singing.

I would have held you closer, longer, letting go those lesser cares of life, all the shallow clamor and demands that bear no urgency in retrospect—not when set against the brevity of days, or weighed against the wonder of your head reclined in sleep upon my chest.

You have left in my heart a hole as wide as the world, my child, and as long as the rest of my life.

Oh Christ, how will this ever be made right? Oh Christ, why do you tarry so long, before you make this right?

Those who feel anger, or who struggle now to trust their Heavenly Father, may add the following:

Anger, doubt, fear, and injured trust, O Lord, simmer in me like the shallow boil of a pot too long neglected on a burner. There is no margin left for a pious pretending that all is well. I cannot fool myself. I surely cannot fool you. You see where every wildfire smolders in the dry scrub of my soul.
O Christ who suffered everything for me, 
how I crave the comfort you alone can give. 
There is no other solace, no other refuge, 
no other advocate, none who sympathizes, 
no other who bears in their own body 
the patterns of my wounding. But even this 
thirsting desire, this parched craving 
for your present consolation, is frustrated 
by the anger, the resentment and confusion 
I feel at what you have sanctioned or allowed. 
It has settled for a time as a dark cloud 
between us, like a gloom obscuring 
a mountain peak. I don’t know what to do 
with what I feel. I don’t know how 
to speak my heart to you, when praying 
stirs such turbulence in me.

When I approach you now 
it is no longer as a carefree child. 
Instead I cower as one exposed, 
shivering, wounded, traumatized, 
shaken by doubts, uncertain of your purposes.

I have arrived in a place I would 
never have wanted to be—in a frustrated season 
where it is painfully hard to trust 
your goodness, your kindness, your mercy 
extended to me, O God.

For what do such words even mean, 
in light of this? When my worst fears 
have already been realized?

Sometimes there are no words.

Silence is kept.
You tell me you are with me, O God,
even in the midst of this.
I long to know you are with me,
even in the midst of this.
Please show me you are with me, O God,
even in the midst of this.

Silence is kept.

I know I cannot see all things as you do,
O Lord, from the vantage of eternity.
I can only see and feel right here, right now,
this pain, this grief, this unrelenting anguish.
A part of me yet recalls—like the memory
of a birdsong, wild and sweet—that distant
promise that in the end all things will be made
right, will make sense, will somehow be redeemed.
I try to cling to that.

But such a dry exercise of faith feels
far removed from these rubbled
ruins where my heart now dwells.
My thoughts are circles, leading nowhere.
I live more often where I feel.
And I feel the shattered and
crushed pieces of my former self
pressed between these granite blocks
of grief, my soul ground down to a few,
meagre fistfuls of its irreducible fragments.

There are hours in which I cling
to your promises, as one swept to the lip
of a dizzying waterfall might clutch
an overhanging branch—and those
holy promises have never given way.
But when my grip grows weak,
I need to know, not only what I hold,
but what holds me. I need to feel
how I am held by you, O Christ.
I need you with me now, O Lord,
my Rock and my Salvation!
For I must live through this—this moment
of emptiness, and ache, and loss.
And then I must live through the next.
And the next.

For now, this moment
is the only place
that I exist.

This moment, from which
my child is absent.

And nothing in this moment—
nothing save you, my God—
can sustain me
through these surges of
shocked bewilderment,
and utter,
utter exhausttion.

Silence is kept.

I am emptied out, O Lord.
My heart is spent.
What once in life was bright with joyous
expectation is now muted and filtered,
like the unexpected blotting of the midday sun,
eclipsed to an unnatural twilight.

Were the moon to be plucked from the sky,
would it leave any larger a void, O Christ,
than the life of this child, lost to us?

Be present, O Spirit of God,
in the empty spaces my precious child
no longer inhabits. Meet me in the crushing quiet of the mornings that once were alive with their curiosity, their creativity, their sweet voice. Meet me in the emptiness of their room. Meet me in the loneliness of the table at mealtime. Meet me in the still vacancies of nights when I would have tucked them in, and kissed their cheek or forehead before sleep.

Meet me in this grief, O God. Meet me again and again and again. Day upon day upon day.

And all of this is only part of what is gone. For as we pass—in months and years to come—the seasons our sweet child never lived to see, we will also miss the many hopeful things that might have been.

We will miss the stumbling forays into life, the kinships and friendships formed; the bike rides and birthdays and family vacations; the blossoming of talents; the growth and graduations; the gradual letting-go as they approach adulthood.

We will miss even the disagreements and hard discussions and hurt feelings that come of loving imperfectly in this life. How many such disappointments we would gladly endure now, just to hold this child again in our arms!

We will miss the bittersweetness of seeing them mature and flourish, to one day leave our home and begin a life that would have been
their own, to see their story of struggle and of joy as it unfolds, and to know that even at the end of our own lives, theirs would endure, touched by ours, the good work of generations carried on. So we will weep for what was lost, and we will weep for what will never be, as the seasons wheel and wheel and wheel, and we grow slowly older in our grieving.


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Whenever someone’s child reminds me of my own, I feel again that sting of emptiness. I feel so suddenly alone, so lonely for the one my arms ache physically to hold.

My muscles still remember how it felt to receive the press of their being, so perfectly distinct.

Sometimes there are no words.

Silence is kept.


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I am too broken, too heartbroken, too shattered and scattered and splintered and rent, to find comfort in anything but you, O Christ.

A single parent—or any who feel alone in their grief—might add:

For who is there to hold me in my grief? I have no one to bear this pain with me,
no one who shares these inmost, nameless
parts of what it means to lose this very child.

There is an intimacy to every loss, as if
it were a temple built of grief. And even those
who love me can't approach the
inner sanctum of my ache. Their sympathies
are once or twice removed from this
holiest of hard and holy places.

Only one who first received the gift of
this child, and held and knew them as their
very own, could journey to this inmost well of
sorrow and drink with me these waters
at their source. And I have none to share these
tears with me; no solace of
communion at this pool of deepest grief.

O Spirit, be to me more present
than a spouse. Be to me a comforter
and confidante and counselor
who sees and understands my every tear
and doubt and thought and fear, who
knows my love, my hope, my heart, my loss;
who names the secret wounds
I have no words to name; who bears
it all with me; who walks this
shadowed road with me;
who lights a lamp to comfort me;
who shares this well of sorrow.
O Spirit of the Living God,
now meet and carry me
amidst my solitary grief.

I need nothing less, O Lord, than to
feel your arms around me, to hear
your voice in my ear, to feel the warmth
of your own tears against my cheek.

Sometimes there are no words.

Silence is kept.
Remain with me, my God.
For you are not aloof from what I feel.
You also lost a child. Your sympathy is real.
Be near to me, O Christ, for you
were also crushed by every grief
and afflicted with every affliction.
You were a man of sorrows.
Somehow, in this, I find a hope rekindled.

I am not alone in this.
My God has gone before me,
into suffering, grief, death,
loss, and separation.
Where I am, you have already been.
And you are with me in this now.

I would follow you, even in this.
Especially in this, I would follow you.

Beyond this grief, O God,
beyond this emptiness and pain,
and from somewhere far beyond
this valley filled with shadow,
sometimes comes the voice of your Spirit
whispering again, “for this promise
belongs to you and your children.”

We are yours, O God.
My child was yours.
Is yours.
Is with you, in the immediacy
of your love.

But I am left here to endure
what life will be without them.
I live now in this tension.

I have no words.
God, give me words,
that I might pour my heart
in prayer to you.

O Christ, creator and sustainer of all life,
and maker of the very child
whose loss I now lament,

now gift me with the faith and hope
and strength it will require to finally
surrender my desires, my dreams, my goals,
my purposes and plans—even my demands—for
how my child’s life might have unfolded.
I tried to protect them. I labored for their flourishing. I sacrificed so much, so gladly,
for their benefit. But it was never in my
power to create the long, prosperous, and
happy life I wished for them.

Now give me the strength I will need
to lay down those dreams,
to more fully release my
precious child back to you.

Such strength is not in me.

I could as easily rip the heart
from beneath my ribs, and offer that.
The cost would be the same.

In my head, I know my child belongs to you,
O God. You created them. Their very being
is your claim. But that bare truth, alone,
is too abstract. It does not figure in the ways
our hearts had grown inseparable; how love of this same child made me more alive and vulnerable than I had ever been, shaping and reshaping me in ways no other human bonding can. I know this child was your creation, Father. I confess that they are yours in ways they are not mine.

Biological parents add the following:

And yet, they were created of the substance of my own flesh and blood, the blueprint of their being bore the stamp of my own, and I feel as if a part of me has also died with them.

Adoptive parents add the following:

And yet, even as you drew me into your family, making me forever one of your own, so I had adopted this dear child, weaving them completely into the fabric of our family. They were chosen to be one of us, to be ours, to be integrated forever into our love. Now to have that graft torn away is like a vicious wounding of the same tender place I had tended so gently to heal and make seamless. I feel now as if a part of me has also died with them.

I feel the impossible pain of Abraham, commanded to release his child to you, to release every dream he had for his child, knowing in his head that the child was yours, a blessing from you, created by you, and yet knowing as well how much of his own heart would be buried with the body of his child.
That great and pressing grief can never be relieved simply by a right theology. It must be transmuted from within by some lavishing of your effectual grace.

How I need that grace made evident today, O God! Some gift of Spirit, as palpable as flesh. I cannot sift the mystery of your ways. There is no satisfying answer I can apprehend. What I need is not a scholar’s explanation of my suffering.

What I need is just to hold and be held within a peace that passes understanding, a peace that flows from your eternal presence.

Grant such depth of peace, my King, such depth of presence, that I might at last begin to let go these broken dreams and disappointments; that I might more deeply trust you with the things I cannot comprehend, and then, within that trust, more earnestly release this child to you—for they were yours before they were ever mine.

And now they live and dwell within your glorious love and light, vibrant and hale and satisfied in you.

So how can I cling and try to hold them here with me, as if they exist now only in my memory, when they are so alive in your delight?

To speak these words, releasing my child, even by degrees, is an act of trusting you, my God, of trusting that your purposes are good, your mercies enduring,
and your promises true.
Even in my anguish, even when
events extend beyond my ken,
your promises are true.

To speak these words repeatedly
is an act and an expression of the faith
that there will be a day—an actual
calendar day—when all this sadness
finally comes untrue.

And with release, let gratefulness increase.
For even in the sorrow and the pain, O Lord,
the wonder and the beauty of the days
I shared with my child remain, and those
glad times still tell the truer story of
what was and is to come.

Within the wide span of human history,
you, O God, in your wisdom chose to place
us near together, to knit my life with the life
of this miraculous being, for a brief
and brilliant time.

Before the world ever began, you ordained that
our existences would overlap. You purposed
that our hearts would intertwine. It was
your design that I would know and hold
this very child.

You granted me the glorious charge
of guiding this beautiful bearer
of your divine image toward the
purposes of your eternal kingdom.

For this privilege and joy,
I offer you my praise.
I would not trade a single day we shared, to lessen my own ache at losing them.

I am grateful for the gift of all that was, O God. I will willingly bear these wounds of love, till love heals every wound.

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Now, O my King, bring us swiftly to that day when every loss your children have suffered is finally and forever redeemed by your joyful mercies; when even this specific loss will be restored, this very grief upended, this particular sorrow overthrown.

Let me begin to glimpse, even now, that flame of hope, its flicker spreading in my vision, dim though its shining might seem at first, through this curtain of shadow.

In days and years to come, O Lord, may all dark doubts and temptations to despair dwindle to nothing, while this shimmering splinter of impending joy swells ever brighter, ever stronger, ever more central and certain at the center of my loss.

Do not let my love turn bitter. Let it turn fierce instead— fierce in its defiance of death, fierce in faith, fierce in its resolve to seek first the Kingdom of my God, tenacious in pursuit of that which is eternal, tender in compassion toward the suffering of others, invested in acts of kindness, mercy, creativity, reconciliation, and restoration—
convinced that all lost joys mourned in this life are but pale preludes of the fullness to come.

Those days I shared with my child were resplendent in their quiet glories.

    Death cannot undo them.
    They are treasures stored.

Let them chime now in my memory, O Lord, as heralds of a greater, approaching glory, like thunders rippling forward in time toward the crashing symphony of their fulfillment, pointing and pulling my heart always unto that impending hour of advent, resurrection, and restoration, when you will heal and bless these lands and creatures and dwell here with your bride;

when I will see my child alive again, hear their happy cry, race to embrace them, and share with them an eternal joy beyond all measure, in a world that will begin at sorrow’s end.

Sometimes there are no words.

Silence is kept.

Amen.