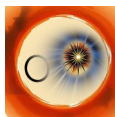


Series: From Ego to...?



Episode: 8

Are Joy and Sorrow the Same?

- A Christian contemplative enquiry

Tony Macelli

Are joy and sorrow really as different as they seem? Might they share something in common by which we can remain rooted in God through both delight and suffering, without denial, fear, or grasping?

Joy, Sorrow, and Inner Freedom

Before anyone calls out, “silly question!”, bear with me one moment. Christians are no strangers to paradox. We speak of losing life in order to save it, of strength made perfect in weakness, of the cross as the place of glory. Within this paradoxical imagination, a question may sometimes arise that sounds strange at first hearing yet may become compelling over time: are joy and sorrow, at some deeper level, the same?

The question may emerge, not abstractly, but in prayer, in suffering, or through long experience. A person who has known great joy may discover how fragile it is, how quickly it passes.

A person who has endured great sorrow may find, unexpectedly, that it becomes a place of depth, compassion, or even grace. Over time, the sharp opposition between joy and sorrow can begin to lose its edge.

Yet the question is easily misunderstood. The issue is not whether joy and sorrow are identical experiences – clearly they are not. Rather, the deeper and more demanding question is this: *can the soul learn to stand in such freedom that neither joy nor sorrow has the power to displace its grounding in God?*

Meister Eckhart and ‘Detachment’

Few Christian thinkers approach this question as boldly as Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328), the Dominican theologian and preacher. Deeply rooted in Christian doctrine, Eckhart nonetheless presses language to its limits in order to speak of union with God.

In his treatise *On Detachment*, he writes:



“I came here to be far from human joy and suffering.”

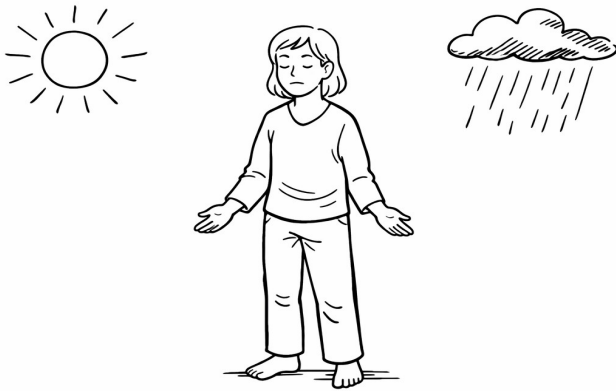


“I was resting in God. But now—?!”

“True detachment is nothing else than a mind that stands unmoved by all accidents of joy or sorrow, honour, shame or disgrace, as a mountain of lead stands before a breath of wind.”¹

At first glance, this can sound severe, even inhuman. Does Eckhart envision a soul untouched by feeling, insulated from the normal movements of the heart? Such a reading would miss his point. Eckhart does not deny the reality of joy or sorrow, nor does he advocate emotional numbness. He distinguishes rather between *having experiences* and *being ruled by them*.

Joy and sorrow are described as “accidents” – not trivial events, but non-essential conditions. They happen to the soul; they do not define it. Detachment names a shift in the soul’s centre of gravity – from what happens to us, to the God in whom we live. The soul no longer rests in what happens to it, but in God, who remains constant through all change.



“The weather changed. Did God change?”

This becomes clearer in one of Eckhart’s sermons:

“Whoever wants to receive God properly must receive him equally in all things, in oppression as in prosperity, in tears as in joy. Always and everywhere He is the same.”²²

Eckhart is not claiming that oppression and prosperity feel the same, nor that tears are indistinguishable from joy. What is equal is not the experience, but the soul’s openness to God within the experience. God does not arrive only in consolation, nor withdraw in suffering. If God is truly God – the ground of being itself – then God must be encountered as fully in sorrow as in joy.

Non-attachment and the Incarnational World

What Eckhart calls detachment many today

would call *non-attachment* – not distance from life, but freedom within it. It is a kind of detached involvement or involved detachment. It is not withdrawal from life, but freedom within it. This distinction matters. Christian detachment is not world-denying.

The doctrine of the incarnation insists that God is present in the world, in ordinary reality, in flesh and time. Detachment, therefore, cannot mean turning away from experience. It means meeting experience without bargaining – without insisting that joy must remain or that sorrow must disappear in order for life to be acceptable.

Properly understood, nonattachment is not the opposite of compassion but its condition. A soul that is not desperately clinging to joy or fleeing sorrow is more available to others’ pain, more capable of steady love.

What Actually Binds the Soul?

From this perspective, the temptation to say that joy and sorrow are “the same” becomes more intelligible. From the standpoint of nonattachment, both lose their power to dominate the soul. Neither determines identity or meaning. In that limited sense, they can appear strangely equal.

Yet this equality lies not in the experiences themselves, but in the soul’s freedom from *attachment*.

The spiritual problem is not sorrow itself, but the soul’s resistance to it – the inward protest that says, “This should not be.” Nor is the problem joy, but the soul’s tendency to cling – the anxiety that says, “This must not pass.” In



“Which seat is permanent?”

both cases, the soul seeks to secure itself through experience.

Joy can bind as tightly as sorrow. Consolation can become something we demand from God, a sign of divine approval. When it fades, faith itself may wobble. Sorrow wounds most deeply not only because it hurts, but because it threatens the story we tell about how life ought to be.

What binds the heart, then, is not experi-



ence, but attachment.

A Clarifying Mirror from Chan Buddhism

At this point, a brief glance at another contemplative tradition can clarify the picture. In the Chan (Zen) Buddhist tradition, teachers repeatedly return to a simple diagnosis: suffering does not arise primarily from pain, but from grasping; not from the passing of joy, but from clinging.

A Chan-style formulation expresses this succinctly:

*Grasp one, and both bind you.
Release one – the knot is gone.*

Chan does not speak of God, incarnation, or grace. Its metaphysical framework differs from Christianity. Yet its insight into the mechanics of inner bondage closely parallels what Eckhart presupposes. When the heart grasps, it binds itself. When grasping loosens, the knot begins to unravel.

For Christians, such insight does not replace theology; it sharpens self-understanding. It can help expose subtle forms of attachment, including spiritual attachment – the unspoken belief that prayer should feel a certain way, or that faith should reliably produce consolation.

Returning to Christian Ground

Seen in this light, the Christian path does not ask us to collapse joy and sorrow into sameness. It asks us to relocate trust. The soul grounded in God does not depend on joy for

reassurance, nor interpret sorrow as abandonment.

This insight echoes through Christian tradition. Ignatius of Loyola speaks of *holy indifference* – not apathy, but freedom from compulsive preference. *The Cloud of Unknowing* advises letting go of both sweetness and bitterness in prayer, so that love may rest in God alone.

What changes is not what we feel, but where we stand. Joy remains a gift; sorrow remains a trial. Neither becomes the measure of God's presence.



"So this is where prayer continues..."

Risks, Misunderstandings, and Spiritual Bypassing

Such teaching carries risks if misunderstood. One danger is *spiritual bypassing* – using spiritual ideas to avoid rather than engage human pain. Detachment can be misused to dismiss grief, minimise trauma, or withdraw from emotional responsibility.

Another risk is dissociation: mistaking numbness or emotional flattening for spiritual freedom. Genuine detachment does not reduce aliveness. It deepens it! It includes sorrow rather than evading it, and receives joy without clutching.

For this reason, detachment must mature slowly, within the real conditions of a person's life. It is not achieved by effort or imitation. It ripens through prayer, honesty, and grace. Where suffering is acute, the call may not be to detachment but to accompaniment, lament, and care.

The measure of authentic freedom is not emotional neutrality, but increased compassion, patience, and capacity to remain present.

Are Joy and Sorrow the Same?

We can now return to the opening question with greater clarity.

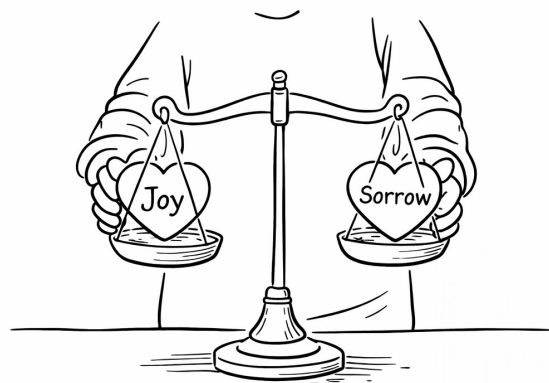
Joy and sorrow are not the same. They differ profoundly in texture, meaning, and effect. To say otherwise would flatten human experience and betray both psychology and faith.

Yet from the perspective of a soul deeply grounded in God, they can become *equally inhabitable*, without either needing to be fixed or resisted. Neither has the final word. Neither determines identity. Neither can displace the soul from its true home.

In that sense – and only in that sense – joy and sorrow may begin to appear strangely alike: not because they are identical, but because God is equally present in both.

The contemplative path does not promise a

life free from sorrow, nor a life secured by joy. It offers something quieter and more durable: the possibility of standing so grounded in God that whatever comes can be received without fear, without grasping, and without loss of faith.



“They are not equal, but they are both held”

Note on Sources and Method

This essay draws briefly on insights from the Chan (Zen) Buddhist tradition. These are used *diagnostically rather than doctrinally* – that is, to clarify how attachment and aversion operate within human experience, not to import Buddhist metaphysics or religious commitments into Christian theology.

The theological framework of this article remains fully Christian, grounded in Scripture, the doctrine of the incarnation, and the Christian mystical tradition. Chan material is introduced only where it illuminates experiential dynamics already presupposed by Christian contempla-

tives such as Meister Eckhart, and is offered as a clarifying mirror rather than an alternative authority.

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Practice Suggestions

Grounding the soul in God amid joy and sorrow

1. Naming Preference in Prayer

For: regular pray-ers, retreatants

At the start of prayer, notice what you hope for – peace, reassurance, clarity. Name it gently, then add:

“Yet I place my trust not in this outcome, but in You.”

2. Receiving Joy Without Clutching

For: those in fruitful or settled seasons

When joy arises, practise gratitude without projection. Instead of *“May this last”*, say inwardly: *“This is given. I receive it freely.”*

3. Staying with Sorrow Without Interpreting It

For: those in grief or spiritual dryness

When sorrow arises, resist the urge to explain it. Say quietly:

“This, too, is here. God is here.”

4. Non-Preferential Attention in Prayer

For: contemplatives and those drawn to silence

In prayer, allow whatever arises to be present without correction. Attend not to content, but to the fact that you are present to God within it.

5. Discernment Against Spiritual Bypassing

For: mature practitioners, carers, directors

Ask: Is this practice increasing compassion and presence, or diminishing them? Authentic detachment deepens humanity.

6. A Simple Daily Review

For: busy lay Christians

At day’s end, notice moments of joy and sorrow. Do not obsess about this. Ask where you clung or resisted. End with:

“Into Your hands I place both what delighted me and what troubled me.”

Endnotes and References

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