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## Situating Grief in Redemptive History for the Sake of Joy

We consistently experience the loss of every-day-good-things; flowers, a good meal, or time with friends. Redemptive History provides a context within which to understand our lives and the ebb and flow of pleasure and sorrow. We explore this context, and then demonstrate how therapists can assist clients to develop an accurate Redemptive Historical perspective of gain and loss. The culmination of this renewed perspective is increased acceptance of momentary grief, fuller experiences of joy, and life strategies that align with God's kingdom.

### The Desire for Joy and Relief

In the western world, happiness is commonly pursued through consumption and experience. We come upon, and lose, pleasurable things on a daily basis. How we interpret and interaction with loss significantly alters our lived experience. Take the humble dandelion as an example. When I use the blooming yellow flower to satiate my hunger for joy and pleasure, I consume it. When the flower wilts, how will I be sustained? Should I find another, and potentially more satisfying flower? Consumerism is fueled as we habituate to our current comforts. We often long for more pleasure, and get immensely frustrated or bitter, when the everyday good-gifts

that supplied our baseline happiness stop working or wilt. For example, how do you feel when your cell phone stops working, your coffee spills, the meal isn't ideal, or your special someone shifts their attention to something else?

This condition is not new. Oswald Chambers (1935) pointed out the dynamics of demand in human relationships, and I suggest his observations also apply to everyday objects and experiences:

If we love a human being [or experience of any kind] and do not love God, we demand of him [or it] every perfection and every rectitude, and when we do not get it, we become cruel and vindictive; we are demanding of a human being [or thing] that which he or she [or it] cannot give.

There is only one Being who can satisfy the last aching abyss of the human heart and this is the Lord Jesus Christ. Why our Lord is apparently so severe regarding every human relationship is because He knows that every relationship not based on loyalty to Himself will end in disaster. (p. 154)

Let us return to the dandelion when it is ready to seed—wispy and white. It is beautiful, but if you breathe heavily or the wind picks up, it is gone. But you can pick another, and then another. This is just an example, but the cycle of gain and loss in life provokes grief. The ebb and flow of everyday life in the already-and-not-yet of the kingdom is just like the dandelion. It comes, and

it goes: plans with friends are cancelled; a restless child is awake in the night (and therefore so are you!); a new dinner recipe didn't work out. Two problems arise for the average modern Westerner. First, our desire for pleasure is thwarted, and the orientation of our entitled heart is exposed. Second, we are sad to lose a genuine good, and we do suffer a real loss.

### **Approaching the Problem of Loss**

These two problems of living drive discontent. To address them we must first address our standing in the world. Charles Taylor and C.S. Lewis each provide fertile inquiry into the human condition that assists us as we consider our two problems, and subsequently how to support clients. Taylor (1991) has critiqued the current popular belief that an authentic self, rests on self-fulfillment. In short, he disagrees that persons define their own purpose, identity, preferences, and joy, and should pursue this self-construal to find happiness. Instead, Taylor argues for a different understanding of people, suggesting we can only discover the authentic self, purpose and identity, in relationship with others as we dialogue, oppose, limit, experience, or find proximity to something or someone else. He argues that objective sources of meaning and morality ultimately exist independent of one's own will or personal satisfaction, and cannot be escaped. Taylor calls the sources of meaning and morality 'Horizons of Significance'. We might call some of these sources 'communities of significance', because the influence of family, friends, and politics cannot be ignored. In this manner, the Redemptive Historical narrative believed by Christians classifies as an important Horizon of Significance.

Turning to work of C.S. Lewis, we find his consideration of the question of morality. Lewis suggested that living well is concerned with three things. "Firstly, with fair play and harmony between individuals. Secondly, with what might be called tidying

up or harmonising the things inside each individual. Thirdly, with the general purpose of human life as a whole: what man was made for: what course the whole fleet ought to be on: what tune the conductor of the band wants it to play" (Lewis, 2015, p. 72). I suggest the modern American therapeutic and entitlement culture, over invests in the second concern—harmonizing the self. Lewis continues, that to think well about morality, we must address all three relations; relations within man (internal), between man (relational), and the power that made him (redemptive history). Given that Christians believe humans are embodied, and operate within relationships and the structure of wider creation, both Lewis and Taylor's contentions are formative for the Christian. In combination they provide significant guidance on living well within daily repetitive cycles of good and loss. One way to think about a Christian orientation to life is to acknowledge and live according to the meaning and morality structures of: Horizon 1—the embodied self (with emotions, perceptions, and interpretive ability that allows a dialogue of sorts with the self), Horizon 2—community (immediate and broader systems of relationships and influence), and Horizon 3—the Biblical World (with its grand design, purpose, and redemptive historical arc). Each Horizon stakes some claim in organizing what it means for any one person to live well within redemptive history.

### **Scripture and Horizons of Significance**

The life of the Corinthian Christians in scripture provides an opportunity to observe the three Horizons in the apostle Paul's thinking. In 1 Corinthians Paul addresses a litany of practices associated with worldly living as these young Christians have prioritized Horizon 1 and 2. Brendsel (2019) comments that it was the Corinthians "everyday, culturally conditioned walk that clarifies, crystalizes, and, we can add, cultivates their fleshliness, their foolishness, their thrall to the wisdom of the world" (p. 14).



vanitas

In other words, culture and pleasure orient their lived experience. In 2 Corinthians chapters 3 through 5, Paul is encouraging these maturing Christians by contextualizing Horizons 1 through 3. Paul frames Horizon 2, a communal life, using the term “we”, and “boasting” in one another as they serve as “ambassadors” for God. Paul reconciles with Horizon 1 noting the “wasting away” of self, and being “afflicted, carrying in the body”. Yet Paul frames Horizon 1 and 2 within Horizon 3, “as we look not to the things that are seen”, “for the love of Christ controls us”. One key verse holds all three Horizons in tension: “For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you” (2 Cor. 5:13). Redemptive historical living requires the interwoven tension of Horizons 1 through 3, and this can help us with moment-to-moment loss, grief, and joy.

Critically, Horizon 3 includes a right perspective of both, creation and fall in the Bible’s redemptive story arc. The purpose of our lives, and the enjoyment of fresh dandelions, fellowship, food, and other pleasures is to glorify God as each gift experientially demonstrates and reflects His glory (Is 43:7, Is 6:3, Ps 19:1). We are made to glorify God through the acts of daily life, corporate worship, experiencing the beauty of creation, and being oriented towards the day of consummation. But, within redemptive history, the fall is present, and we await the next chapter (Gen 3, Rev 21:4). Therefore, we must expect (as did Paul with the Corinthians) that loss will occur, even while God’s glorious creation is still experienced. The hope of the Christian life is felt in the present and sustains us through trials (2 Cor 4:17-18). When we situate life within this redemptive historical Horizon, both loss and joy, are expected and provide meaning and sustenance.

### **The Application of Horizons of Significance**

Let us turn to the clients in our clinical practice. Many are oriented to Horizon 1 (the self), in such a way that the sustenance of redemptive history is rarely experienced.

Frankfurt (2005) articulates a core issue in our social milieu that reinforces our orientation to Horizon 1:

The realms of advertising and public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of [distortion] so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept [of distortion].

And in these realms there are exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who – with the help of advanced and demanding technology of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing, and so forth – dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right. (p. 22-23)

Western culture is saturated with attempts to make us believe Horizon 1 (our self) is to be perpetually satisfied. Crawford (2015) refers to these sophisticated crafts persons as “Choice Architects”, tirelessly extorting our attention, and manipulating what we internalize as a “good life” for economic gain.

No matter our orientation to life, lament and grief still provides orientation to those who dare listen. These visceral experiences expose our affections, and subsequently what we value. As the dandelion moments pass, or are cut short and we feel loss and pain, we can ask “what did I really long to enjoy?” This question peels back our eyes from the “good life” constructed by “Choice Architects” and culture, allowing us to investigate the longings God has situated within the Imago Dei. We are signaled by feelings of loss and pain (Horizon 1), and simultaneously, when we are saturated in the Kingdom (Horizon 3) we may become aware of the joy intended (Horizon 1+3). Psalm 126:6 beautifully exposes the tension of loss and joy:

He who goes out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
bringing his sheaves with him.

Great tension exists between cultural pres-

sures that assume the viability of Horizon 1 and 2 to orient our lives, and a Christian life that sees everything in reference to Horizon 3. Living in this tension is no small task. Brueggemann (2001) recommended “Prophetic Imagination” as a method to cut into these tensions, and engage in new ways. His method entails carefully criticizing and dismantling the prevailing expectations, and assumptions of the current narrative, so that a fuller picture of reality becomes apparent. He suggests that the subsequent emergence of a new consciousness about the full story and our experience, allows for new meaning and desire that energizes new choices. Brueggemann utilizes the imagination as a key tool to recognize what new choices may look like when reality is witnessed. For example, we are only able to peel back our eyes from the “choice architects” endless pursuit of more, to acknowledge the common beauty of life when specific realities are engaged. First, the pain of loss is allowed and not medicated or ignored. We must viscerally pronounce “this is not as intended”. Jesus wept (John 11:35), and Paul wrestles with himself and his actions (Rom 7) in expressions that agree with the wider reality (Horizon 3). Second, we must accept the desires of the heart go beyond the current heralds (culture, choice architects) and our feelings. The culture has a myopic view. We thirst after God (Ps 63), and John speaks of the “bread of life”. Third, we have a view of God’s alternative possibilities and ending. The redemptive

narrative of hope (1 Thess 4:13-17), seen in triumph in Revelations 19-21, is actively hoped for. Fourth, we accept the rich possibilities of God can sometimes make us lament more. The good Samaritan (Lu 10) is often out of sight, and the humble and in need are rejected (Lu 7:36-40). When such truths are allowed as we criticize the mirage of our culture, we dismantle the logic of clamoring after moment-to-moment pleasure. A new perspective and desires are energized by the God of the Bible who is on the move. I imagine Aslan, prowling, breathing, creating, to viscerally connect to the alternative story that scripture provides. This is the master stroke of stories like Narnia—they imagine with us. In Aslan we find beauty, hope, joy, and the ability to chuckle at lesser losses while still allowing the sting of loss to be felt.

Lament that is organized by Horizon 1, 2 and 3, has critiqued and dismantled the status-quo. Such lament acknowledges human longings, human pain, social connectedness, and future hope. When using the question “what did I really long to enjoy”, this new perspective energizes new choices, such as chuckling at loss while feeling its sting. Table 1 provides some daily examples of naming the good that we longed to enjoy, the need or interruption that occurred in the already-not-yet, and the beauty of God’s original and longed for design.

Table 1. Good, Interruption, Design

<b>Good</b>	<b>Need/Interruption</b>	<b>Beauty of God’s Design</b>
When about to sit and rest	A child needs you to provide a drink of water	Rest and recovery
Time with a good friend	They cancel	Being known
Drinking coffee	It spills	Creative beauty and sustenance





*water of life*

## Clinical Application

We transition to apply the preceding discussion to clinical practice. In particular we present ways to clinically address the two problems discussed earlier; that many clients desire for pleasure is regularly thwarted by life's small and continual challenges, and second, they are sad to lose a genuine good and suffer real loss. This approach rests upon Horizon 3 (a biblical worldview and Christian Psychology), and incorporates what is coherent from Interpersonal Process Therapy (Teyber & McClure, 2011), Horizons of Significance, Prophetic Imagination, and the Christian tradition. The 'vehicle' for this integrated strategy is the person of the therapist, who provides compassion, attunement, and intervention as conceptualized and organized by Horizons 1 through 3. Such therapists take seriously; the body, its experiences, trials and temptations; social and cultural factors and formation; and life in redemptive historical time. This orientation allows the therapist to remember the following in their work: There is real comfort in the loss of all things for the sake of Christ's name; the privilege of providing acceptance to one another despite shame and sorrow; we must gently name (discover) what is true in the life of a client, including the harm done to them and by them, the self-defeating strategies they use to cope, and the orientation of their hearts (Day, 2006).

Four processes within this clinical approach to loss and joy are outlined below. We include details of specific interventions, and sections of therapist-client dialogue that are based on real client interactions. The four stages include: exploring the clients personal dynamics; utilizing key emotions and responses; assisting in meaning making; and utilizing prophetic imagination and exploration.

### Process 1: Exploring Personal Dynamics

Exploring personal dynamics includes a number of therapist foci and actions designed to illuminate a client's experiential re-

lationship to the phenomenon of ongoing daily losses and grief. The therapist notices and names themes, patterns, and rigidity in the client's relationship with grief. This is made possible by tracking and validating salient emotions, asking about desires, and discerning the self-protective function of the client's intra and interpersonal strategies. Attending to these features enables the therapist to experience and explore a client's interpersonal resistance, learned behaviors, schemas, and worldview (Teyber & McClure, 2011). The cumulative picture constructed by a client's personal dynamics begins to reveal the guiding Horizons of Significance in their life. The following therapist-client example is based upon a real case, and models an exploration of a client's lack of awareness and resistance surrounding a perpetual state of dissatisfaction:

Therapist (T): I have noticed you often repeat stories of disappointing experiences when we talk... like that dinner party that was canceled..., and you usually shrug them off each time. I'm wondering what it would be like for you if you shared them more fully with me, or if you stopped sharing them?  
Client (C): I'm not sure, I guess you can't just dwell on things – life is hard and you've just got to deal with it.

T: Shrugging helps you deal with the hard parts of life. What is your experience of having shrugged a lot over time, yet repeating disappointing stories?

C: Well... it hasn't changed anything, but I can't just stop and be sad.

T: You can't just be sad — something feels wrong, unsafe, or uncomfortable about that...

C: It wouldn't do anything. You can't fix everything.

T: Aah, I see... You have sadness about all these broken things, and you can't just fix them—so you shrug. I am curious why you might still repeat the disappointments with me. What do you long for here with me?

In the interchange above the therapist is curious about the thematic presentation of disappointing events, the client's response of shrugging, and how the client may be using these behaviors to cope and communicate. The effectiveness of the client's strategies is explored to generate client insight, which leads to the client's schema of the world. The therapist investigates this schema by asking about the client's contrasting desires. In this short exchange, exploring 'stuck disappointment' moves to the client's perceptions and desires.

### **Process 2: Emotion and Response Focus**

A second process the therapist can engage is a focus on the client's emotions and responses, which helps illuminate unacknowledged grief/loss and how the client copes with these feelings. To engage this work, the therapist can invite further exploration of the most salient feelings. This requires helping the client to express the full meaning of the feelings as they experience them in the present. Teyber and McClure (2011) make clear, "Simply allowing clients to be able to have the feelings that are commensurate with what actually happened to them is a lifelong gift to many" (p. 197). As client's become honest with life in the Kingdom of God, loss is experienced more fully, and the meaning the client associates with the loss is available for exploration. This work usually adds to the illumination of the client's primary Horizons. Building on awareness of the salient emotion, the therapist explores the full constellation of associated feelings. For example, anger and shame commonly occur around sadness. When the therapist helps the client tolerate and acknowledge each important emotion the client can often then explore the actions and choices they make in the light of the emotion (Teyber & McClure, 2011). This further illuminates Horizons and coping strategies. The therapist can assist the client to notice and examine their responses, and the underlying values and heart orientation. The therapist supports the client to consider what

they are learning about their approach to, and perspective on life, and assists them in finding value-aligning alternatives. This can provoke great ambivalence between safety, pain reduction, and an orientation to thriving within the kingdom.

C: I just want to feel better, to feel ok about all these things I get distressed about.

T: How do you feel right now as you name that you want relief from distress and shrugging?

C: I'm just so frustrated that everything goes wrong so much!

T: You want relief from disappointment but you also see how this world has so many losses.

C: yes... exactly. It just keeps coming—one thing, then the next. I just hate it, it's so depressing.

T: Depressing. It really weighs on you.

C: well... I feel really stupid... I mean I know things go wrong!?! But I just want something... to have something go right for me... to enjoy it!

T: You feel stupid—like there is something wrong with you that you long for good things and to enjoy something going right. I can really appreciate wanting things to go well, to be joyful, to be OK. I can see why you would shrug and tell me about it—wanting relief, even while knowing life keeps going like this.

C: yeah... I hate that I end up just talking about it over and over, I know shrugging doesn't really do anything—But what else can I do!?

T: That's a great question. You seem to want something other than how you currently see and respond to this cycle of disappointments, shrugging, wanting comfort. Can we explore that together?

C: sure, I guess...

T: I notice that you long for good things to go as you hoped—things to work out well, to be pleasurable, even though the world has shown you its far more unpredictable... there is a tension between your hopes and the realities of life... what do you notice?

The prior exchange provides an example of



traversing from a client's current desire to feel better, to setting up a collaborative exploration of ways to live in the tension of the already-not-yet of the kingdom. This work often provokes strong ambivalence within clients, with felt sorrow juxtaposed with hope, as they come face-to-face with their lived reality and how their focus on specific Horizons of significance impacts their choices. From such discussions, the therapist can assist the client in a process of meaning making.

### **Process 3: Meaning Making**

The Christian therapist does not simply teach the redemptive historical moment and its meaning. Rather, the therapist recognizes that the client must internalize their own experiential understanding of meaning over time. Said differently, the therapist assists the client to personally re-evaluate, and re-organize the three Horizons of Significance (self, community, God). To do this, therapists wonder about the client's primary focus (often the self) as it relates to other Horizons. An exploration of the original contexts and systems that led the client to their understanding of life is paramount. It is within this exploration that clients discover what taught and sustained their views of how life should/would work. Curiosity is warranted, and the therapist can assist the client in courageously criticizing distorted aspects of the client's understanding of life. This is facilitated as both therapist and client name, hold, and dismantle, harmful, distorted, and inaccurate understandings and internalizations of life experiences. The client's new awareness, emotions, and emerging sense of meaning come to the fore, and the Christian therapist can assist the client to explore Godly longings, and redemptive historical truth and meaning, through scripture and other sources. This process energizes a new perspective of self, community, and God's world, that undergirds new behaviors. Clients are supported by experientially and intellectually engaging the three Horizons through active

practices both in, and out of session. For example: homework may include reading about God's presence, or comfort; Psalm 126 may be used to work with ambivalence surrounding good, yet hard choices; the Apostles Creed may be meditated upon to restructure a habitual focus on just one of the three Horizons. The Christian tradition supplies plentiful resources to assist in this work. A thorough examination of these resources is beyond the scope of this work, but the interested reader is directed to Johnson's work on Soul Care (2017).

T: It seems to me that your present moment experiences of "if things are going OK or not" has a lot of power over your whole life experience, even though you feel like your faith says other things to you.

C: Yeah, I wish I could believe better! Or, really, I guess it just stinks that Heaven is so far away... then at least things would go right!

T: Part of you really just wants to get to heaven where it feels good. I get that. And I notice even as you say it, that "feeling good" has a very primary position in your life. Loss or broken doesn't fit in.

C: Are you suggesting wanting to feel good is bad?

T: Not at all, I think it fits right in with being human—that God made us with that intention. We so often learn that feeling bad just shouldn't exist. Yet it does. Your faith holds out that heaven is coming, but we aren't there yet. That comes to mind as we hold this in tension?

C: In my family, if you were sad, you weren't 'trusting God enough'... that seems so... backwards.

The interchange above, both begins an exploration of the client's Horizons, and assists the client to begin criticizing what they previously knew. The therapist is not shy about asserting worldview truths that are shared with the client, which is necessary to avoid a purely individualistic critique. When the client begins to show energy towards a new understanding and choices,



*god allows to be mocked*

the therapist can assist them to imagine new options and focus outwards.

#### **Process 4: Imagination and Outward Focus**

As a client's energized focus increasingly aligns with God's Imago Dei in the redemptive narrative, clients can be helped to express their new orientation. It is often less threatening (yet exciting) for clients to initially enact this change in artistic, poet, or other forms, that allow the client to imagine themselves living in a new way, with balanced Horizons. Traditional therapeutic techniques such as the 'empty chair' can also facilitate imaginal expression and embodied action that assist learning. Four practical strategies are offered to help clients acknowledge the consistent loss within life and enact a satisfying response: first, invite clients to a new relationship with God, modeling this as necessary, and helping them express requests, concerns, and sit within God's perspective. Second, encourage clients to find symbols for hope and 'way pointing', such as images, ornaments, or even people, and place these in areas of need or regular contact. These symbols often provide critical reminders and a chance for the client to continue reorienting themselves. Third, discuss concrete life practices that align with the three Horizons and facilitate the expression of genuine lament, hope, love, and faithfulness. These practices may be private, communal, declarative, or anything else that supports the client's formation. Fourth, help clients practice a fully embodied and honest response to small losses of letting go, appropriate sadness, looking to kingdom hope, and enacting current minded gratitude. These practices are not all easy, yet they assist clients in actively changing maladaptive and non-kingdom minded living. Below are four example questions that may prompt clients to imaginatively pursue new choices.

T: You have said that God's view of His world and your place in it—when experienced personally—impacts your choices, expectations, hopes, and more. Can you

imagine and describe how you might live, interpret, and react to \_\_\_\_\_ if you were to embrace the world God has you in?

T: What do you imagine you would be talking to God about as this occurs? What challenges might come up?

T: Given what you just shared; how might this impact your experience of loss? ... Ok, and how can you see yourself acting?

T: Are there any reminders, or signs you have in your life to help orient you to this rich perspective on loss and joy that you are showing yourself right now?

#### **Conclusion**

We all face two persistent issues: our desire for pleasure is often thwarted, exposing our corrupt hearts along the way; and we do often lose genuine good and suffer real loss. When unaddressed, these predicaments can lead us to choices and reactions that create mental anguish, and increase the distress of broader habitual patterns. This article argued that a large amount of personal distress occurs because we have distorted views of three primary sources of meaning that orient our values and actions. These sources were named as Horizons of Significance, and include: our embodied self and its experience, the influence of our community and history, and our place in God's world. Our experiences and choices distort our view of the Horizons, and also the relationships we perceive between them. Clients can be greatly assisted to reorganize their lived experience and make functional choices within redemptive history when therapists courageously engage them in the following ways: first, engage and reorder their own lives, perceptions, and actions in redemptive history; second, provide the safety of an incarnational presence; third, explore the clients personal dynamics; fourth, engage clients key emotions and responses; fifth, assist clients in new meaning making; and sixth, utilize prophetic imagination in the exploration of new option.

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