



134: How to Pray When You're Sad

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 134.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but it's also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment while you're in the right place. You'll find a thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next right step.

Lately, it feels a little bit like I've been repeating myself in these episodes, saying the same things over and over again. See, I just said it. Each week, I noticed that. And my first instinct is to come up with something different, to find a way to change the cultural subject. But in many ways, these episodes are not just a mirror for my own personal reflection. They also echo, on a small scale, what's happening in this cultural moment.

What does it mean to find spiritual answers to practical problems when the problems are unlike problems we've had before? How can we continue to move forward when so many things seem like they're standing still? I don't know if you've heard, but we're still in the middle of a pandemic. Most states are still unsure what's going to happen with school in the fall. We're still not making very many plans. We're still mostly wearing masks in public, and we're still waking up to an actively working against racist systems in this country.

These episodes I hope offer a few minutes of reflection for you to consider what you're carrying. Even if it looks the same as it did last week, and then discern just one next right thing. So we keep showing up here together and that's what we'll continue to do today.

One thing I love about the community we have here is our collective hunger for knowledge and a shared pursuit of the next right thing. That's why I'm glad to announce this episode is sponsored by Skillshare. Skillshare offers membership with meaning with thousands of classes to choose from real projects you can create and the support of fellow creators along the way. My favorite Skillshare empowers you to accomplish real growth in topics you care about.

For example, right now, you can learn lettering for self-expression by Ade Hogue or, one of my personal favorites, you can take a class on creative writing from memory by the one and only Ashley C. Ford. Or if you want to improve your culinary skills or finally learn how to use that camera, there are classes perfect for you, too. Maybe your next right thing is learning something new with Skillshare, explore your creativity and get two free months of premium membership [skillshare.com/nextrightthing](https://www.skillshare.com/nextrightthing). That's two free

months of unlimited access to thousands of classes at skillshare.com/nextrightthing. I can't wait to see what you create.

Now for today's episode, listen in.

In the early spring of 2012 during weekend away to Florida, John and I passed what looked like a forest fire on the highway. It wasn't the dangerous kind, but the controlled kind, where the fire experts were standing by and the brush burned and traffic can still continue on the road. I don't know a lot about controlled burns, except 1.) they are carefully planned, 2.) they're set for a good purpose, like to restore an ecosystem's health or to prepare an area for new vegetation. And 3.) they're super hot.

Controlled or prescribed burns can also reduce the amount of overgrowth in an area in order to minimize the risk of, for example, a campfire causing an actual forest fire. They set an intentional fire in order to keep an unintentional fire from burning out of control. But then as I mentioned, they're really hot. Driving by from the road, I rolled my window down to get a photo and I could literally feel the pores on my face enlarge. I'm not kidding. Even though it was under control, it was still real fire.

When I was in fifth grade, the house across the street, burned down. No one was hurt in the fire, which makes this easier to talk about, but the memory of that night has lingered for decades. Now I say it burned down, but that's not really true. It didn't burn all the way down to the ground. It more burned out from the inside. The house was still standing when it was all over, but when we walked by on the way to school or drove past it on the way to the mall, no morning lights of life spilled out from the kitchen. No family members bustled out the front door, no sprinkler watered the lawn out front. Instead the house loomed, present, but also absent. Sometimes fire burns the insides but leaves the outside alone.

At night, when I looked out across our lawn and tried to peer through the darkness and see that house, it blended in heavy in the shadows between the houses around it. If I didn't know it was there, I wouldn't have known it was there. They said the fire started in the sauna. And I remember that word because I didn't know what a sauna was. So to this day, when I hear the word sauna, I think of that house on fire on the quiet street in Iowa. I think of waking in the middle of the night, the sound of breaking glass, staring out the window of my parents' bedroom, the whole street red from the firetruck lights. But what I remember most of all was the smell.

If you've ever had a house fire or been near a house fire, you know what I mean? It's not the familiar and nostalgic October bonfire smell or the gentle smoke after a burned-out candle. What burned in that house was not merely wood or wax. What burned there was countertops, sofas, plastic and memories, and the smell lingered on our street for what felt like months.

I got wind of that smell last month we visited Blowing Rock here in North Carolina, and we passed by a little shop we used to visit that we heard burned down last summer. Again, burned down. It didn't burn down. It burned out. The shop is still standing, just like the house across the street in Iowa was, but when you get close, you see the doors are boarded up. The attic windows black, the smoke damage is thorough and devastating.

Even though that Iowa neighborhood house was ruined, the structure still stood. Shutters framing, lifeless windows, a roofline intact. It was just an empty structure. A still yard with overgrown grass. It was empty, but if you didn't look too close, it looked normal-ish.

Today, some of us are walking around empty. And if you don't look too close, we look normal-ish, too. But the truth is a refining fire has swept through our lives. And we're still trying to figure out if this fire rendered a total loss or if anything is salvageable. We're still trying to figure out if this fire is an accident, or if it's a controlled burn.

In her book, brilliantly titled *This Too Shall Last*, author K.J. Ramsey writes these thoughtful words, "In the beginning," she says, "Our society loves tales of rising heroes. We've so fused our American dream with the risen Christ that when suffering enters our lives and does not leave quickly, all we know how to do is hide, judge, or despair. We've reduced the gospel to rescue power, to privilege and hope, to swift healing, reducing ourselves and the process. Western Christendom has long treated suffering like a problem to fix and a blight to hide. Eugene Peterson was right. It is difficult to find anyone in our culture who will respect us when we suffer."

K.J. continues, "When our storylines do not match the arch of triumph, we've come to expect and revere, we can feel stuck on the outside of both our communities and God's grace. You don't need another before and after story. You need grace for the middle of your story.

Again, that book is called *This Too Shall Last* by KJ Ramsey.

Well, last week, I talked about learning the art of asking questions and that's something I'm always doing. Paying attention, not only to how to be a better question asker, but also to be a truer question answerer, especially with those questions I dare to ask myself in the presence of God.

One question I've been asking myself lately about many areas of my life is this: What kind of fire is this any way, God?

Are you standing by ever the expert bearing witness to the refining making space for new good growth in this plan to controlled burn? Or is this a fire that has caught you by surprise? Is this a fire of destruction taking the waste and the wellness alike?

Sometimes our questions don't reflect good theology. Sometimes our questions reveal our lack of faith, our fear, or our confusion. Ask them anyway. God has what it takes to sort it all out.

Asking honest questions is part of healthy lament. We see it all over the Psalms. If you're like me and you find yourself in the middling times, carrying questions of your own, let me first say you're in good company. And let me second say, this is part of lament and this needs to be our normal. But lest, you walk too far into despair, here's what's also normal and even misunderstood in Psalms of lament. At least four things are present in some form: a prayer crying out to God, an honest complaint, a request, and a vow of praise or confidence.

Let's don't rush through the first part to get to the last part. It's all lament, the complaints in God's presence and the statements of praise.

In closing. I'll read Psalm 13 and see if we can put this into practice.

How long Lord will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, Lord my God, give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death. And my enemy will say, "I have overcome him." My foes will rejoice when I fall, but I trust in your unfailing love. My heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise for he has been good to me. T

his is the word of the Lord. It is absolutely true and given to us in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 134 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of healthy lament can be normal and can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow because it's true this is a podcast about making decisions. The bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives as always. You can find me on instagram @emilypfreeman and online at emilypfreeman.com, where we always provide a transcript for every episode, either for you, if you prefer reading to listening. But also for our deaf and hard of hearing friends who would otherwise not have access to an audio offering.

One more time, the book I mentioned earlier is called This Too Shall Last written by new author, K.J. Ramsey, who I'm glad to say is also a member of hope*writers, which is the online membership community for writers that I co founded five years ago, almost five years ago. Well, I have to add that because I'm so proud of our writers for doing good and beautiful work in the world.

Well, we only scratch the surface on the topic of lament today, but if you want further listening, I'll recommend a podcast episode that my friend JR Briggs just told me about.

It's a conversation between Donna Harris. She's the founder of Builders and Backers and Andy Crouch. And it's on The Redemptive Edge podcast. The episodes called Creative Action Begins with Lament, and it's fantastic. That's season two, episode two.

I'll end with a quote from a book I read last summer called Whistling in the Dark by Frederick Buechner. He writes, "The worst thing will surely happen no matter what that is to be understood. Paul writes, 'We will have peace both in heart and in mind we are assured to be in trouble as the sparks fly upward, but we will also be in Christ.'"

Thanks for listening. And I'll see you next time.