

The Gospel and Emotional Health

Embrace Grief and Loss

Job 38.1-7, 42.1-6; Psalm 44.1, 9-12, 19-26; 2 Corinthians 1.3-7; 4.16-18; Matthew 27.46

June 11, 2023

Job 38.1-7 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, ² "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ "Now gird up your loins like a man, And I will ask you, and you instruct Me! ⁴ Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, ⁵ Who set its measurements? Since you know. ^{42.1-6} Then Job answered the LORD and said... "I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." ⁴ 'Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me.' ⁵ "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You; ⁶ Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes."

Psalm 44.1 God, we have heard with our ears, Our fathers have told us The work that You did in their days, In the days of old... ⁹⁻¹² Yet You have rejected us and brought us to dishonor, And do not go out with our armies. ¹⁰ You cause us to turn back from the adversary; And those who hate us have taken spoil for themselves. ¹¹ You give us as sheep to be eaten And have scattered us among the nations. ¹² You sell Your people cheaply, And have not profited by their sale... ²³⁻²⁶ Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not reject us forever. ²⁴ Why do You hide Your face And forget our affliction and our oppression? ²⁵ For our soul has sunk down into the dust; Our body cleaves to the earth. ²⁶ Rise up, be our help, And redeem us for the sake of Your lovingkindness.

2 Corinthians 1.3-7 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. ^{4.16-18} Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Matthew 27.46 And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

We've been looking at the emotionally healthy church ...the idea that spiritual maturity NOT leading to emotional maturity... IS NOT TRUE spiritual maturity. When grace finds you, it also changes you... emotionally. People who are really growing spiritually but who stay emotionally stunted are not really growing spiritually as they and others may think.

So far, we've seen four qualities of that inward emotional maturity that comes along with spiritual growth, and today, Number FIVE: embracing grief and loss.

Unless you're very young or very, very sheltered you know that everyone suffers grief and loss in their lives... If you live to be very old...you'll attend a lot of funerals for a lot of loved ones (unless you don't have many loved ones and that's another kind of grief and loss).

And you may notice that not everyone who suffers a lot of grief and loss actually grows from it... In fact, most people get damaged by it and may get bitter or cynical or withdrawn... Loss is not an automatic path to growth and maturity.

But if we EMBRACE grief and loss, in the way the gospel enables we don't simply experience it or endure grief and loss but we let it form us. In some sense, you dwell on or reflect on it, and you lament the loss before God who uses it for good in you... and even those around you.

So, let's look at:

#1) Their Grieving and Ours

#2) The Arc of Lament in the Bible

#3) The Benefits of Redemptive Lament

When you look at the pattern of grieving in the Bible – the way God's people deal with loss – you'll notice some differences and contrasts with our own practice (here in Sunny SoFL or modern America in general).

They, THE ANCIENTS, sort of... let it all hang out...

We, THE MODERNS, sort of clean it up...

For them (ancient people and people in many parts of the world today!) for them – it's a big messy part of being human – crying, big, loud, heart-wrenching, weeping and sobbing ...and for us – “*No thanks, I'd prefer to maintain some dignity, privacy and sanity*” ...but often it's just sani-tized.

In the Bible, we read about funerals where paid mourners are hired (Amos 5.16)... to wail. But for us, we play soft music and sit on very tidy couches and we... whisper...

It's not like we never see death and disaster...we see it a lot on TV/internet...we see thousands of deaths and we get a front row seat to catastrophe...floods and wars and crimes. Somehow, we're both over-comfortable and uncomfortable with death and tragedy...both desensitized and sanitized.

But in the Bible, they rip their clothes ...throw dirt in the air. They really express grief and loss. And they talk about it... In fact, they make talking about grief into an art form.

The longest book (and center) of the Bible is a collection of 150 poems. They've been variously categorized...and probably the largest single category of poetry in the Psalms... is the psalm of lament (poetic reflections on grief and loss).

There's a whole book called *Jeremiah's Lamentations*, whole sections of the Bible where the writers openly reflect on grief and loss. They write poetry about it and creatively, intensely, emotionally they muse on grief, pain, suffering, betrayal, defeat, loss, sickness and death.

Maybe this is why, IN our own culture, art-forms like the Blues and Soul Music have arisen: because we need help expressing our emotions especially grief and loss.

Now, if you DO look closely at the way Bible people express and embrace their grief and loss ... you may discover a kind of progression in the art of lament.

We could talk about a micro progression in personal lament and a macro progression in the Bible as a whole.

In other words, you see a process modeled in persons AND you see in the unfolding narrative of the Bible an arc development ...the story of grief/loss builds to a crescendo when all the woe and pain that ever was converges like a laser beam of sorrow/misery and it's expressed. Let's look at that: the personal process and the narrative arc.

Job was a person who knew great loss. He lost his entire business. He faced the death of his adult children and then he became very ill.

He grieves – really expresses his remorse and pain... Then his friends come and trying to “help” Job by convincing him that he’s suffering because he’s done something to deserve it... (“God rewards good people with an easy life... a n d ...”)

And after hearing so much of this, Job takes the bait: he starts defending himself to show how righteous he is and to prove he’s done nothing to deserve this calamity. Job basically declares, “*God’s made a big mistake!* I’ve been righteous in every way I know” says Job. And he lays out his own record and his own rightness.

And then God steps in and asks Job a series of questions. In CH 38-41 almost every sentence ends with a question mark. “*Where were you when I made the universe...the angels...the stars? Do you really think I made a mistake and that you know better than I do?*” (129 verses of questions!)

And then Job responds, “This suffering disoriented me...but expressing my grief with openness and candor in the presence of God and these friends has reoriented me like never before... Something that was only theoretical has now become experiential: I have come to know God! (42.5) “*I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You!*”

The loss/grief...combined with the wrestling and reflection and the intervention of God’s grace has given Job something he never had or could’ve had – an encounter with God that left Job changed.

The same dynamic’s in the 44th Psalm – the writer thinks back to the arrangement God made with Israel – the Covenant.

He’s heard that past generations saw the faithfulness of God... “*But now we’re really beginning to wonder! We feel like you’ve sold us into slavery at bargain-basement prices! Like we’re disposable, like we don’t matter to You...We feel like sheep at a slaughter-house awaiting death ...Lord, are You even awake?*”

You may think, “Is that even in the Bible?!” It sounds really... disrespectful! I would never speak that way to God... my way of speaking to God when I’m dealing with grief and loss is much more...

What?... Subdued...Suppressed...Sanitized?

The poem – again: an artful reflection on grief and loss – the Psalm ends with an appeal to God’s grace, the Hebrew word “*hesed*” – “Lord remember Your agreement! And please uphold Your part of the deal – “for the sake of Your *hesed*, (tr. “lovingkindness”) – loyalty to Your Covenant!”

Refusing to sugarcoat or sterilize, he says, “Lord, it seems You’ve forgotten us!” Very similar to Job – one person’s journey into loss, through wrestling and expressing grief – on his way to reorientation and encounter with God. It’s the way of personal lament in the Bible writers.

But also, in the whole story of the Bible a kind of macro progress...in which God Himself answers the deepest questions of all His people in all times... As if all our questions are collected into one final gasp, one desperate question, “Why?”

Jesus Christ, depleted and helpless and abandoned by everyone asks it from the Cross: “*My God, My God WHY have you abandoned Me?*”

He quotes it in the language of the people, so they’ll trace it back to how they learned it – a quote from the 22nd Psalm – a Psalm of lament.

And when He quotes it, it’s as if the ideal Man is asking on behalf of every doubting believer, “Lord, why am I suffering – will You please wake up and do Your part of the deal – remember Your agreement!”

And God says to everyone represented IN Jesus Christ, “I am awake, and I am doing My part...AND because You’ve failed...I became human so I could do your part as well!”

In Jesus, I became a Man and lived the life every human was intended to live – the life of unswerving beauty and obedience and love...and now I die, as a criminal, the death you deserve to die...

And IN the dying breaths of the God-Man, that rock-bottom moment of deepest loss in all of human history, our deepest questions are verbalized. My misdirected anger toward God is exposed and resolved AND my rage at God becomes a desire to fall at His feet ... and fall into His arms. In Christ, death and loss lead to forgiveness, salvation and resurrection!

I want to ask, “Why?”, but Jesus Christ asked the question FOR me!

And while I don’t yet get all the particulars – “Why the miscarriage? Why the injury? Why the betrayal? Why the divorce? Why the infertility? Why the unemployment? ...the addiction?... the birth-abnormalities?...the breakup? the death?” ... While I don’t often see the specific answer, I DO see that the Sovereign God who is Lord even of human pain is also the God who somehow absorbed the evil of my particular loss so that it will mysteriously work for good...even as the death of Jesus Christ became the source of infinite good through resurrection.

But in order to get there – in order to see this mystery...I can’t fool around...I can’t sanitize the suffering or stuff it or escape from it into drugs and alcohol or sex addiction or food addiction or shopping...or entertainment...or fake forgiveness... or withdrawal into privacy and isolation.

There has to be a grappling...an embrace of the pain...it has to formulate itself into that "why?"- question that can only be answered at the Cross of Jesus Christ. Some readers have noticed that the bold questions and even accusations made against God seem to be absent from the New Testament and one possible answer is that Jesus Christ asked ALL our questions in that ONE moment on the Cross: "Why?"

Maybe the conservative way says to loss and grief – *"Keep a stiff upper lip... buck up...be a man...when the going gets tough, the tough get going...don't dwell on it! Move on."*

And maybe the progressive way says, *"We're free to express our feelings...and we allow ourselves to reflect and get counseling and maybe even to indulge in obsessing on our hurts and losses and to fixate and blame and wallow in self-pity... and withdrawal."*

But there IS a third way and that is to both reflect on grief AND to see that the Cross reveals the God who brings beauty out of ashes...even the greatest loss of all history – out of THAT comes the healing of all our hurts and the answer to our deepest questions. The One God who suffers with us.

And to know that the death at work in me (this present pain of a breakup or a death of a friend or a disease or a crime) THIS will not only be healed in eternity but will somehow make the experience of eternity much richer and more significant ... in fact infinitely significant... (2 Corinthians 4.16-17)

"Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison."

This hope... that arises when a believer in Jesus Christ muses on, reflects and embraces the losses and griefs that he/she has experienced – when we join OUR pain to the loss Jesus endured... we die with Jesus knowing that with Him there's also resurrection. That's what keeps us from withdrawing from others – becoming victims or bitter or solitary. *"I've been hurt before when I dared to love – I won't make THAT mistake again!"*

Instead, we stay willing to LOVE even though we know that to love is to risk heart ache, heart break. The alternative to love is, as Lewis said, to lock our hearts away...to keep ourselves safe, wrapped up in hobbies and comforts but unavailable to others (except in very shallow relationships).

And that safe, isolated heart becomes impenetrable and dies.

'Only two alternatives: to become vulnerable by risking love OR to be safe, not risking love or friendship or giving ourselves to others. One leads to pain and resurrection, the other leads to safety and death without hope.

One last tip: You gotta do this with others. It's ok to journal. I do. But these psalms of lament were meant to be shared...

The Apostle Paul says to the church at Corinth that this comfort we get from God in the gospel is meant to be shared with others. *"May the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."* (2 Corinthians 1.3-4)

Job's friends were in some ways "comfortless comforters" because they hadn't known the depth of pain Job had known...

The healing that God wants for us is applied in community and relationship—people who experience this deep comfort and are therefore able to sit and listen and, *when appropriate*, to share your own story of grief/loss and God's comfort and hold out to your friend real healing and help.

Q U O T E S

There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell.

— C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960; p. 121)

But we all suffer. For we all prize and love; and in this present existence of ours, prizing and loving yield suffering. Love in our world is suffering love. Some do not suffer much, though, for they do not love much. Suffering is for the loving. This, said Jesus, is the command of the Holy One: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In commanding us to love, God invites us to suffer.

God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. ... It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live. I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend said perhaps it meant that no one could see his sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is splendor. ... Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it.

It's the neverness that is so painful. Never again to be here with us—never to sit with us at table, never to travel with us, never to laugh with us, never to cry with us, never to embrace us as he leaves for school, never to see his brothers and sister marry. All the rest of our lives we must live without him. Only our death can stop the pain of his death. A month, a year, five years—with that I could live. But not this forever. I step outdoors into the moist moldy fragrance of an early summer morning and arm in arm with my enjoyment comes the realization that never again will he smell this. As a cloud vanishes and is gone, so he who goes down to the grave does not return, He will never come to his house again; his place will know him no more. JOB 7:9-10 One small misstep and now this endless neverness.

— Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (1987)