

“Where Is God When We’ve Suffered A Loss?”

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New Testament Lesson: John 11:32-37

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 23

In the Highlands of Guatemala, over the desk in a missionary’s guest room hangs a framed newspaper photo. It shows a group of young children standing close together with their arms straight out from their sides. Asked what it was and why it hung on his wall, the missionary explained, there is a custom among the native Mayan people who are Christians. Whenever they feel bad or sorrowful or in pain, they put their arms out, imitating Jesus on the cross. That way they feel as if they are bringing Jesus’ suffering into their own suffering. The Jesus who could weep for them and die for them takes their individual sufferings up into his, and they are then no longer alone. They can feel Jesus totally identifying with their pain, and in a miraculous, cosmic, spiritual way, their pain is lessened. So, what on earth is going on in the picture of these young children making the gesture of the cross? The missionary moved closer to the picture and asked, “Do you see that long black shadow on the ground? That’s a rifle barrel. There are about 20 others right in back of it. Someone in the town joined the rebel fighters, and the military wanted to make sure others didn’t do the same. So just outside of the range of the picture, army troops had lined up. And just after this picture was taken, they fired and killed all the children in the village. They all died. They were buried in a pit that can be seen just in back of them.

The children all knew they were going to die, but when they held out their arms, they could feel Jesus identifying with them ... and they weren’t afraid.¹ A gruesome and tragic event, but one that shows faith even in the midst of death and dying.

Today we ask the question, “Where is God When We’ve Suffered a Loss?” There is no greater loss than the loss of a child. But we grieve all kinds of losses, *whether it’s the loss of a job*, the loss of a *dream* such as being a parent, *breaking up* with your boyfriend or girlfriend, or ending a marriage, and of course, *death*.

Death is no doubt the hardest loss, but it’s not the only loss we suffer. Why is death so hard for us, given our faith in Jesus Christ? Should true Christians really be grieving the loss of our loved ones?

¹ Thanks to the Rev. Stan G. Duncan for this story shared via e-mail at <http://www.homileticsonline.com>.

Doesn't scripture say things like, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God ..." "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore..." "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." "O Death, where is your sting?"

Pretty powerful stuff. But so is, "Jesus wept." Knowing what he knows, being who he is, how can Jesus have wept, knowing he was about to raise Lazarus from death? And what does that mean for us when we've suffered a loss, us who believe in the resurrection, or are supposed to?

In Our New Testament lesson today, Mary the sister of Lazarus comes to Jesus, kneels at his feet and says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She's kneeling at Jesus' feet – clearly she has faith that he could have healed her brother and kept him from dying. But her faith is not enough to overcome her grief. John tells us, "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved."

What is Jesus disturbed about? What does that mean – he was disturbed? Actually, the original Greek is helpful here. We may think it means that Jesus felt compassion for Mary and the others who mourned, but actually the Greek words John uses don't mean compassion, but rather agitation and indignation.

The Message Bible may capture the meaning a little better where it says, "When Jesus saw her sobbing and the Jews with her sobbing, a deep anger welled up within him." And then when he headed for the tomb, Jesus also wept. When John wrote about this, he used two different words for "wept" – one for Jesus and a different Greek word for Mary and the others. According to John, Mary and the others wailed and lamented as they mourned the death of Lazarus. Jesus, on the other hand, "shed tears."

There are lots of different emotions here, and nowhere does Jesus rebuke or criticize Mary and the others for feeling what they feel. The fact is, it is just not clear what Jesus is angry about and why he weeps. All we know is that Jesus is deeply moved by this experience. As heavy as this is, some Bible commentators might actually make us chuckle a little at the way they quite accurately translate what John has written. For instance, E.V. Rieu points out that where it says "Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit," a perfectly legitimate way of translating that would be to say that "Jesus snorted in the spirit."² Others says that what John means is that Jesus was disgusted with the lack of faith of those around him, or that he was outraged with the overall circumstances surrounding the death of Lazarus. We just don't know.

² E.V. Rieu, *The Beloved Disciple's Memoirs and Letters* [Lockman Foundation, 1995], 105.

But kind of like how Mark Buchanan interprets it where he says “Jesus is about to stand death down. He weeps, even knowing full well that he is about to call Lazarus forth from the grave, and present him alive.” “But the sight and sound of these mourners,” says Buchanan, “stir(s) his blood, wrench(es) his gut. Death is a gross injustice. Death is a low-down enemy, a playground bully.” “It should not have this kind of power, be able to (steal from us) ... and then taunt us.” “It is not right that death should be able to convince us that there is something in creation that can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ – (something) that can take even those who believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life and throttle the hope that is in them, make even the faithful think that his timing is tragically off”³ – that if only he had been there sooner ... Lazarus might not be dead right now.

But we know that this is not the case. People die, you lose your job, hopes and dreams get shattered, we experience terrible loses, and we have to find a way to live with it. Maybe the most helpful thing this passage in the Bible does is that it shows us that emotions are all over the place. They can’t be predicted, controlled or even explained, at least not completely. Emotions can only be felt, and worked through.

And that’s where faith comes in. For Christians, our faith in God, our belief in Jesus Christ, our trust in the Holy Spirit helps us. ***Our faith helps us to get beyond the great losses of life.***

I mean, look at Jesus, in the Gospel According to John. Jesus, who knows that he’s soon going to suffer horribly and die. Jesus, who’s just learned that his friend Lazarus has been dead for four days. Jesus, accused by Mary of not caring enough to hurry to Lazarus’ side when he got the news. Jesus, seeing his good friend Mary crumbling in front of him in tears of grief. Jesus, surrounded by people who are sobbing.

Is it any wonder that Jesus experiences a deep sense of internal stress and upset? Is it any wonder that he trembles and begins to weep? There is a lot going on for Jesus in this moment – and in all moments of life. Jesus cared deeply for Mary and he cares deeply for you.

Stand up right now, as you are able. Exercise time. This can also be done seated, but please, stand as you are able. OK. Now stretch out your arms. (But don’t hit your neighbor.) Now close your eyes and think of a loss you have suffered. I’ll give you a moment to do that.

OK, now with your arms stretched out (or relaxed a little bit if you need to), imagine the full extent of Jesus’ suffering being brought into your own suffering. Jesus who wept. Jesus who died for us and for our sake, for our salvation. This is Jesus, right now, taking your suffering up into his. You are not alone.

³ Buchanan, Mark. “Jesus wept.” *Christianity Today*. christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/march5/4.60.html. March 5, 2001.

Can you feel Jesus accepting your pain, identifying with your loss and suffering?
Can you feel your pain lessened, the heaviness of your loss made lighter? I
know I can. Open your eyes if you haven't already. Relax your arms. Have a
seat.

Where is God when we've suffered a loss? My hope is, you've just found out.
But either way, know that this church is here for you; that your pastor is here for
you. Reach out, let me know how you're doing. Together, we can find God in
the midst of any loss.

That is our faith. This is God's gift to us, made possible through Christ – the gift
of God's peace poured over us and moving through us in the power and comfort
of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Gentle God, you care for us with a mother's love. You nourish us with an
embrace of holy love, which surrounds us, forgives us, and encourages us.

Your love birthed in us, brings healing and wholeness.

Help us to face our pain and challenges honestly and in the knowledge of your
compassionate love.

Let us run into your open and welcoming arms and never feel separated from
you and your Holy Spirit.

For there is nothing in life or in death that can separate us from your love, O
God, which we know most fully in Jesus Christ.

We pray for those who grieve. Help them through the pain of loss.

We pray for those who feel betrayed. Reassure them that you are ever faithful.

We pray for those who struggle financially or live on a tight budget. Send your
love, O God, to push aside their worry, making room for the certainty that you will
provide.

And for those whose home-life is strained or their relationships fractured, we pray
that you would show us new ways of responding to the same old situation, and in
that, O Lord, work your miracle of renewal and reconciliation.

We pray all this in the name of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, who came to us
in the spirit of love and taught to us this prayer of new hope and new life that we
pray together now, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**