

How Do We Reconnect with God During Times of Loss and Hopelessness?

~Lamentations 3:1-24

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We are 5 weeks into the shutdown because of COVID-19. During this time, we have experienced some gains. If we live with other family members, we have gained more time at home together. Some spaces have gained time together as spouses because one or both now works from home. We may have gained appreciation for going out - to a mall, to eat or to a movie. We may have gained time to get at neglected home projects. We also may have gained a new appreciation for online technology that enables us to connect with others.

We have also experienced a variety of losses. Many have lost income or lost your jobs. Some have lost some savings. We have all lost normal life. Some workers have lost the camaraderie of working side by side with colleagues. Some have lost loved ones – to the virus or to other causes. They have also lost normal grieving rituals of funerals and receiving other's sympathy in person. Some have lost their wedding ceremony and all the dreams for that day. Graduating students have lost their graduation ceremonies. We have lost face to face socializing.

We face the potential of more losses. Earlier this week, I watched a financial analyst summarize the projections of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). They predict that 2020 will be the worst economic year for the world since the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Some small businesses will close and never reopen. We don't know when we will begin to take baby steps back towards normalcy.

We live in a unique time for us. Yet many societies before us have experienced massive loss like the world during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918-19. Invading armies have overrun nations that displaced millions. Floods, earthquakes, wildfires and tornados have left communities permanently changed. Sometimes, we experience overwhelming trouble in our personal lives. We can go through a year with multiple waves of trouble. Such trouble on a national or personal scale can lead to hopelessness and despair even for Christians. We may feel we have a lost connection with God. **How do we reconnect with God when we experience loss and hopelessness?**

Thankfully, God's Word contains real accounts of real people. It shows people like us struggling to reconnect with God in dark times. One such time occurred in Jerusalem about 2600 years ago. The city and its people lived under constant threat from Babylon. God ordained this because of the people's unfaithfulness to Him. He sent prophets to call them back to Him.

The prophet Jeremiah had this difficult assignment to minister during this time. He lived in Jerusalem during the siege from the Babylonians. He saw and experienced the people's suffering. He eventually witnessed the city's fall and destruction. The book named Jeremiah contains his writings and sayings.

Then a little book follows called Lamentations. We don't know for sure if Jeremiah wrote the book. But we do know the author witnessed Jerusalem's destruction like Jeremiah. In this writing, we see a way to reconnect with God in times of loss and hopelessness. My hope today is that if you have experienced some losses in your life because of this pandemic or from the past that continue to trouble you, you will receive help and courage from the Lord to deal with them and connect more closely with Him. To do this, we will first look at what this author writes. Then we will step back and look at what happens to him. Here we will see a way to reconvene with God. So, will you please find Lamentations 3 in your Bibles or you can just listen.

Lamentations 3:1-24 (ESV)

3 I am the man who has seen affliction
under the rod of his wrath;
2 he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
3 surely against me he turns his hand
again and again the whole day long.
4 He has made my flesh and my skin waste away;
he has broken my bones;
5 he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
6 he has made me dwell in darkness
like the dead of long ago.
7 He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has made my chains heavy;
8 though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;
9 he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones;
he has made my paths crooked.
10 He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;
11 he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;
12 he bent his bow and set me
as a target for his arrow.

- ¹³ He drove into my kidneys
the arrows of his quiver;
- ¹⁴ I have become the laughingstock of all peoples,
the object of their taunts all day long.
- ¹⁵ He has filled me with bitterness;
he has sated me with wormwood.
- ¹⁶ He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;
- ¹⁷ my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;
- ¹⁸ so I say, "My endurance has perished;
so has my hope from the LORD."
- ¹⁹ Remember my affliction and my wanderings,
the wormwood and the gall!
- ²⁰ My soul continually remembers it
and is bowed down within me.
- ²¹ But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
- ²² The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
- ²³ they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
- ²⁴ "The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

The writer begins by describing his sufferings. Each 3-verse section summarizes his feelings or perspective. So, in verses 1-3, the writer basically says "**it's dark**." He has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath. He recognizes that God brought this destruction upon Jerusalem. Even though he may have individually followed the Lord, he still suffered with his people. So in verse 2 he declares this feeling of darkness. "He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light." Today, we would say someone in this state is in "a dark place." Even though this writer, possibly Jeremiah, knew God, the actual destruction around him troubled him. In verse 3, it's like he cannot get away from the trouble. Today, that happens when we turn on the news. It is mostly troubling or disturbing news. Wherever we turn, we see some sort of COVID-19 news. We cannot get away from it. Wherever this writer looks, he sees the destruction of Jerusalem.

Then in verses 4-6, the writer says, "**I'm broken**." His flesh and skin have wasted away. These symptoms characterized someone who endured a long time of hardship on a starvation diet. Then he portrays God as

besieging him. He feels God surrounded him with bitterness and trouble. When unrelated troubles multiply, we look for an explanation. We conclude the only one who could control all of it must be God.

This besieging leads to another feeling in verses 7-9. He feels **“trapped.”** There’s no way out. He can’t escape. The Lord walled him in and put on heavy chains. He also feels that God won’t even respond to his prayers. When we have nowhere else to turn, we at least have prayer to cry out to the Lord. But in this state, the writer concludes God has even shut off that avenue of escape.

Then in verses 10-12 he feels **“hunted.”** He is the prey and God hunts him – like a bear or a lion waiting to pounce. Then the lion strikes and drags him away off the path to devour him. Or he feels hunted by an archer. God pulls back his bow, with a target on the writer’s.

Then God lets the arrow fly. It hits the target in verse 13 striking the author deep in his kidneys. It would severely wound the writer so that he could hardly walk. On top of God’s perceived persecution, others taunt him all day. As if God’s arrow to his kidney was not enough, people shoot their little taunt-arrows all day. So by verse 15, he expresses the bitterness of his life. “He has filled me with bitterness. He has sated or fed me wormwood. The wormwood plant had a bitter taste. It served as a metaphor for hardship or sorrow.

Finally, he comes to verses 16-18. Here he summarizes the impact of his sufferings. His teeth grind on gravel. Sometimes, prisoners or the desperate were fed bread made from seeds swept up from the threshing floor. Little stones would mix in with the seeds. Bread with stones indicated a miserable life. He also cowers in ashes. In those days, they put ashes on their head to symbolize mourning. But he not only mourns. He trembles in ashes as if expecting more grief and trouble to come.

So in verse 17 he concludes, “my soul has no peace and I have forgotten what happiness or goodness is. He concludes in Verse 18 – “My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord.” Some of your translations may say “My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped in the Lord.” I tried to reconcile these two different translations. The translators have taken one of two paths. Some say the word refers to the writer’s ability to keep going or persevere. Suffering completely drained him of perseverance. The other translation path says he lost his splendor or glory of his life. He is unable to keep living in any normal state of good living. Instead, he lives in misery. In either case, he experienced significant loss and now has no hope.

Now how do these 18 verses show us the way to reconnect with God during times of loss and hopelessness? Let us stand back from this passage and notice something that happened. In verse 18, the writer uses the word

“Lord” for the first time. Before, it was “he.” Now it is Lord. It seems that speaking out his sufferings enabled him to begin the journey back to the Lord.

How do we reconnect with God when we experience loss and hopelessness? 1 - We must lament (grieve) our sufferings and losses before the Lord. When this passage starts, darkness dominates the writer’s perspective. He unloads his feelings and perspective – “It’s dark. I’m broken. I’m trapped. I feel hunted. This is bitter. I have lost all strength and hope.” Somehow this clears his mental fog.

Then he calls out to the Lord – verse 19 – “Remember my affliction and wanderings, the wormwood and the gall!” He just said in verse 8 that the Lord shuts out his prayer. But now he prays through a desperate cry for help. Then verse 20 – “My soul continually remembers and is bowed down with me.” So like most suffering people, he swings from moments of hope to moments of despair.

Then everything turns in verse 21. “But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.” Here is the second step to reconnecting with God. **2) We must call to mind the goodness of God.** As he does this, he discovers reasons why for hope. First, **The Lord NEVER stops steadfastly loving us.** “The steadfast love of the Lord NEVER ceases.” “Wait a second. I thought you just said he shut out your prayer and hunted you like a skilled archer.” That does not sound very loving.” But God’s steadfast love never ceases. Even when he disciplines us, He love us. His love does not depend on how he feeling on a particular day. God is not subject to wild mood swings. His love is a steadfast love that never ceases.

The writer also hopes because - **The Lord’s mercies NEVER come to an end.** Think about that. Mercy, undeserved favor from God, never ends. In fact, to ensure we don’t miss this, God provides us with new mercies every morning. So when you got up this morning, God’s mercies awaited you. He will continue to pour them out upon you through the rest of today. Then when you get up tomorrow, more mercies await you.

He also hopes because **The Lord’s faithfulness is Great.** Faithfulness is God’s consistency, stability, truth and permanence. God’s faithfulness and integrity remain intact no matter how difficult or hopeless life seems.

Did you notice the change that occurred in verse 23? It’s similar to the change we saw back at the end of verse 18. There, the writer moves from talked about God as “he” to God as “Lord.” Now in verse 23 he talks directly to the Lord. Not “great is his faithfulness.” Not “great is the Lord’s faithfulness.” “Great is your faithfulness.”

This leads to another reason for hope. **The Lord is my portion, therefore I will hope in him.** Why is that a reason to hope? Well, the Old Testament used the word “portion” to describe a piece of land. But everyone in Jerusalem has just lost their land. The Babylonians came in and conquered the land. So the Israelites had no portion. They lost their homes, their city, their vineyards, their fields, their independence, their freedom, their country and many of their friends and family. The Babylonians deported thousands to Babylon. They lost everything.

Except the Lord. The Lord is my portion. God taught this principle to the Israelites through their priests. They received no land inheritance when Israel first went into the Promised Land. Numbers 18:20 tells us “And the Lord said to Aaron, ‘You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel.’”

This can be a strange blessing in times of loss. We see more clearly that God is our ultimate hope. We find Him trustworthy. We discover He stays with us through the discomfort of our illness or suffering. He cannot be destroyed and or killed or taken from us. In fact, God uses suffering for His greater purposes. Jesus lamented, suffered, died and saved us.

So this writer, possibly Jeremiah, shows a path to reconnect to God through dark times. First, pour out your heart and frustration to God. (If you don’t have the language for it, use the Bible’s laments). Then call to mind God’s goodness and the reasons for hope.

But these are not 2 easy steps that we can do in 10 minutes and get back to joyful living. Sometimes, it can take a long time. It can involve reflecting on our thinking and challenging lies we believe. It may require others to help us do this - a trusted friend, counselor, pastor. But as we go through this, we can at least move forward from “My endurance has perished and I have no hope” to “this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.”

But does this really work? Merrie Eizenga works with Focus on the Family in their Kerith retreats for pastors and their spouses. She writes this.

“The older I get, the more I understand about loss simply because I have experienced it more. If I had written this article when I was 20, I may have had a few valuable things to say, but I wouldn’t have really known what I was writing about.

Generally, when we speak of loss, we think of the physical death of someone we've loved. Most of us know the ache of saying goodbye to someone precious. I understand that kind of loss; I've lost my father, my mother, my brother and several dear friends. These were deep, life-changing losses for me.

But loss is so much broader than just physical death. Pastors can experience loss of trust in those who betrayed them because of some groups loss of reputation, loss of respect, loss of congregants, loss of relationships, stamina, passion, hope and dreams.

That's a lot of loss. To further complicate matters, few of us are adequately equipped to navigate this lonely, confusing road. . . . Many, rather than working through our losses, will deny them, minimize them, rationalize them or simply quietly withdraw so we don't have to deal with them at all. We turn away from our losses instead of turning towards them which, sadly, delays our healing.

So how do we actually process loss? She quotes one author who suggests taking the time to sit alone quietly in a safe place, and begin to write down the losses that you have suffered. One by one. And then grieve those losses, one at a time. You may wonder, "If I start listing my losses, will I ever stop?" Maybe you'll be so overwhelmed with emotion that you'll get stuck. You may try and figure out what value there would be in going over your losses. Isn't what's lost, lost? What's done, done?

I used to wonder the same thing, (she continues) until I sat down with a pen and paper and began to write. Something happens when you simply present the list of losses you've experienced to One who loves you deeply and promises to heal the broken-hearted. This quote from Roy Fairchild resonated deeply with me: "The refusal to mourn is the refusal to say good bye to beloved persons, places, missed opportunities or whatever has been taken away. Many of us, especially in the ministry follow this pattern of refusal. Genuine grief, is the deep sadness and weeping, that expresses the acceptance of our inability to do anything, about our losses. It is a prelude to letting go, to relinquishment. It is the dying, that precedes resurrection."

In my life, I went through this exercise soon after discovering this article. Though difficult, I couldn't believe how much it helped. I had been carrying or pushing down losses in ministry that I experienced over the years. They would raise their head and trouble me suddenly when something similar happened. But after I expressed my losses and lamented them to the Lord, I found new hope in the Lord. I don't think about or carry those losses with me anymore. This practice is possible for anyone because of the Lord's deep love and promise to heal the broken hearted.

So when you experience loss or hopelessness, lament your losses before the Lord. Then recall the goodness of God. Maybe you could even do this today, this afternoon. Spend some time in prayer and grief before the Lord. But then recall His goodness so you go forward.

If you don't know Christ, you never have been connected to Him. But you don't have to remain apart from Him. He sent Jesus Christ to reconcile us with God. Jesus endures the loss of his life so that we could gain with God. So now anyone who puts their trust in and gives allegiance to Christ, will be forgiven by God. He will immediately adopt you into His family. Then you will experience His never ceasing steadfast love, His never ending mercy and His great faithfulness as your everlasting partner. So if you would like to receive Christ, maybe you can pray this after me. "Lord God – I admit that I am lost apart from you. I admit that I have sinned against you and others. Now I put my trust onto you, Jesus and your work on the cross. I give my allegiance to you." Now you will forever be able to call to mind the goodness of God so you have hope.