

Has God Forsaken

Learning the language of lament

The horrifying attack on innocent people in New York City and Washington, D.C. has left us reeling. What seemed like sure foundations have been shaken and even shattered. Comfortable assumptions no longer ring true. We grieve for ourselves, for our loss of safety and innocence—we grieve for the multitude of innocent victims and those who love them. We feel powerless. We have very little control over these events and their results. What we can control is our response to this crisis as people of faith.

Lament offers an opportunity to express both grief and faith. In the midst of searing pain, it takes enormous faith to cry out to God. Far from showing lack of faith, lament affirms faith through claiming and mourning before God all of our suffering, pain, disappointment, and fear. Lament can be both private and corporate. Those who are desolate need to seek each other for healing within the community of faith. Our Christian brothers and sisters are helpful and comforting companions on the journey through our grief.

The Bible does not flinch from the expression of grief and pain. Fully half of the Psalms are psalms of lament. Scripture attests repeatedly that pain and grief are integral parts of the human experience. The Psalms are full of the anguish of God's people, who have been fed with "the bread of tears," or given "bowls of tears to drink." The mothers' inconsolable sorrow for the children killed by Herod echoes the bitter woe of Rachel "weeping for her children" (Matthew 2:18; Jeremiah 31:15).

Yet in our culture we have been conditioned to avoid expressing our grief, expecting somehow to be immune through our sense of an especially blessed national destiny, as well as our affluence, technology, and myriad sources of instant gratification.

Americans are peculiarly resistant to expressing pain publicly. The rapid surface exchanges of "How are you," "I'm fine," "Have a nice day!" bear little connection to reality. Our commonly used prayers of confession consist typically of a listing of our sins, faults, and shortcomings. Rarely do we confess that we hurt, that we are in

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anguish, that we feel vulnerable, that we are suffering. Our pain rarely finds an avenue for public expression.

Yet we must face reality. God knows the truth of the enormity of the attacks. God intimately knows and deeply loves all the victims. When we also face reality and wail in mourning, we enter the anguish and outrage of God in a new and heartbroken way.

Psalms express confidence that God is on the side of those who suffer, and that pain is a universal human experience. The psalmist also experiences a powerful movement from pain toward praise. The psalm begins with an articulate statement of the depth and reality of human suffering. The psalmist recites the times when God's people were hurt and cried out, and how God responded.

Isaiah 53 describes the coming Redeemer as a "man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (v. 3). Jesus lived our own sense of pained bewilderment to the fullest. We hear our own terri-

ble longing for God in the shattering words of the crucified Messiah: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1).

For Jesus, who knew God as "Abba"—Dad, Father—this cry of desolation is nearly unthinkable. It reveals how completely Jesus felt the need to sense God nearby when intolerable or unbearable storms overtake us.

Through his anguish, Jesus reveals his solidarity the suffering of humanity. With the intensity of a lightning bolt at midnight, Jesus shows us God's pledge to be always, forever, unconditionally, and absolutely present for us. Christian experience over the centuries teaches us that there are times, like these, when we are led into painful sit-

uations that disorient and wound us. These times seem bereft of God's presence and comfort. We are tempted to lose heart in God's goodness, care, and sovereignty. During these times, Jesus' anguished cry of desertion becomes our own.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem because the great city would not recognize the reality that would establish peace (Luke 19:41). Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus because of his grief for his friends (John 11:35). With clear-sighted vision, Jesus sees and weeps.

Tears can enhance our vision, giving us new eyes that discern traces of the God who suffers with us. There is comfort in those tears. They bring fresh understanding that God is nearby, sharing our humanity in all its bitterness and all its blessedness.

Over time, our fear and grief will become overshadowed by faith and love as we experience the consolation of a loving God.

The New Testament is crowded

Us?

with people suffering all manner and degrees of pain, seeking a healing encounter with the One who can make them whole. Jesus can, and does. Throughout the gospel stories, transforming love pours out of Jesus like fresh water from a spring, restoring health and vision and peace of mind.

Evil and suffering are always present in the Bible. Jesus opposed the idea that God brings about misfortunes and tragedies as punishments for sin (John 9). Instead, Jesus liberated people from the weight of these notions—replacing them with the assurance of God’s companionship and God’s forgiving, healing grace. Jesus has called us to be outraged when innocent people suffer! Our anger and hurt can then

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mature into passion for bringing healing and grace to those who are feeling crushed by the world.

God’s passion is not to remove evil from the world, but instead to remove every obstacle to our living a life in grace. God does not will hardship and suffering, but God will work through our faith to turn our difficulties and doubts into crucibles of new life through which we can grow spiritually and mature in our Christian walk. God didn’t remove the cross or the suffering—he redeemed it through Jesus, who was willing to face even his own murder with openness to God’s grace.

God shares our grief, which is simultaneously a cry for vengeance and a cry for justice. The enormity of our pain rouses God’s people from complacency. God hears the cries of those who keen with grief and outrage, and God responds.

Although we may feel forsaken by God at times, as even Jesus felt forsaken on the cross, God does not aban-



don us. God hears our cries, suffers with us, and empowers us to resist the power of evil. To respond faithfully in the midst of chaos and pain includes sincere lamentations, fervent prayer, righteous anger; we trust that we are connected with God and others in our suffering, striving to be faithful.

Our daughter had the opportunity to live briefly with a family in Japan

this past summer. On September 12, she received an email message from the mother in that home. Please hear this message as if from a loving God just to you: “I have little words. I’m sorry. But I cry with you. I wish the world will be safe and peaceful. I love you.” □

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