

Grief and our faith

For some people, faith is a great comfort in times of loss. For some people, loss sparks questions of their faith. People may question things they've always believed, People may question God. Or you may experience all of the above.

The Bible brings us the story of someone who went through the same thing.

“What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you. But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God.”

Job 13:3-4

We talk about “the patience of Job,” and he was indeed long suffering through many of his losses. However, even Job reached his limit and began to question God. Several friends stopped by, but their comfort was hollow. They reminded Job of the belief they all had shared, that this misfortune was somehow Job's fault. Bad things didn't happen to good people. They told Job that his anger and questions were a sign of lack of faith. He should be more like them.

“Therefore I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.”

Job 7:11

Job pushed back, not only against his friends but also against God. He demanded that God come down and explain everything because life wasn't making any sense. The old beliefs didn't fit Job's experiences. He wasn't afraid to ask God, *why?*

Job never gets his answer. There's no neat explanation for suffering. God tells Job that he cannot understand such mystery. Job relents, accepting that there are some things he will never understand.

“After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: ‘My wrath is kindled against you and your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.’”

Job 42:7

Then God does the most amazing thing. God condemns the friends who had held their faith of easy answers while commending Job who lost that faith, questioned God, and finally came around to a deeper faith with fewer easy answers but deeper trust.

Being angry with God and asking questions doesn't mean you've lost your faith. Sometimes we have to let go of a faith that is too small for our challenges in order to find our way to a faith (and a God) big enough for our grief as well as our joy.

Wails, Weeping and Weariness

Sometimes we lose something in the translation. Not just the translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into our own languages. Sometimes it's the translation from reading words on the page to encountering the human experience of those words. We read the words in measured voices in church, while in reality they are filled with anger, weariness, mourning. The tears that come from our guts. The questions we have to shout. These experiences are also a part of our faith experiences, and we are no less faithful for feeling them. What would you add from your own experience of loss?

Take some time to read the whole story of these excerpts. In all of them, God's people are allowed to be human in grief, but this moment of their stories isn't the end of their stories.

Hearing the news of his son's death, King David went off by himself. As he went, he wept and cried out, "Oh Absalom. Oh Absalom. I wish it had been me instead of you."

(2 Samuel 18:32)

Hannah was unable to have children, and grew depressed. She wept and would not eat. As she prayed to God, she wept bitterly.

(1 Samuel 1:8-10)

Jacob tricked his father, stealing the blessing intended for his brother Esau. Learning that he has lost the blessing that cannot be replaced, Esau cries an agonizing and bitter cry, "Bless me, Father. Bless me too!"

Genesis 27:34

While Jesus is under arrest, Peter is outside. When questioned, he denies even knowing Jesus. Over and over and over again. Realizing what he's done, he sobs.

(Luke 22:62)

Learning the queen is after his head, Elijah flees into the wilderness. Discouraged and feeling as if all of his work has been for naught, he lies down to sleep, wishing he would die.

(1 Kings 19:3-4)

When Jesus visits Mary and Martha when their brother dies, they are crying as they greet him. As Jesus comes to the tomb, he is deeply moved at the core of his being, the kind of grief that's almost a physical pain. He, too, weeps.

(John 11:32-38)

A Place for Lament

Your church may have a Praise Service or Praise Team. Offering praise is an important part of our faith. But it's not the only part. We also need to leave a space for lament.

The Bible honors lament. 60 of the 150 psalms in the book of Psalms are psalms of lament. We have an entire book dedicated to lament, the book of Lamentations.

Psalms of lament may express sadness, anger, grief, yearning, and even rage. Lament bears witness that something has happened that isn't right, that things aren't the way they should be.

Lament is a cry from the gut. Some of the passages in the lament psalms are so raw we seldom read them in public worship. Their inclusion in our scripture, however, reminds us that there's no feeling that's outside the bounds of our faith.

Raw, ragged lament may not be the place we eventually wind up, but can be the place where we start. Take some time to write your own psalm of lament.



Spiritual practice in the midst of grief

In your grief, your faith may be a great comfort.

In your grief, your faith may be a source of questions and struggle.

In your grief, your faith may feel like a fog of not-knowing.

Allow yourself to find spiritual practice that fits for this season of your life. Your daily devotional reading may be a lifesaver. Keep doing it.

Or, you may not be able to process the words themselves. Let silence be your practice.

Or, you may find spiritual practice in long walks or hearing the songs of birds or sitting with a friend who requires nothing of you or in painting, not to create art, but to make your wordless feelings visible.

You may find comfort in the weekly routines of worship. You may find it unbearable to walk into a church without your loved one. When your spirit says, *wait*, then wait. If your spirit says I'm scared and I don't think I can do this, then ask for help (like asking someone to meet you there.)

Whatever you need to do, do it. And as you engage in your chosen practice(s), be open to the mysterious movement of God's Spirit that has a way of slipping through the cracks, waiting in the corner, and speaking to us in the most unexpected ways.

“My spiritual practice taught me to be present to my grief. The practice and presence and attending to my grief allowed me to begin picking up the shattered pieces of myself and piecing them back together. My spiritual practice allowed me to explore unprocessed grief, thus allowing healing to happen.”



Michelle Cassandra Johnson, *Finding Refuge*