

THE ABSENCE OF GOD

Illness, Grief and Loss

Psalm 102:1-11

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-absence-of-god-illness-grief-and-loss/>

The famous English poet and Anglican priest John Donne struggled with depression and illness. He wrote (and I'm paraphrasing him), "Of all the mysteries that people experience, sickness is greatest. In poverty, I miss things and in loneliness, I miss the company of another. But in sickness I miss myself" [*Being Well When We're Ill*, by Marva Dawn, p. 214]. And he's right, isn't he? The psalmist honestly confesses that he is tormented by pain, but pain made worse by how it changes his relationship with himself, with others and with God.

First, our psalm deals with how illness, grief and loss have impacted his relationship with himself. Can you identify with any of this? The psalmist feels as if his life is going up in smoke (v. 3), he has lost so much weight, he is skin and bone (v. 5) and he struggles with insomnia (v. 7).

Second, ***our psalm deals with how illness, grief and loss have impacted his relationship with others.*** In v. 6, the writer mentions two kinds of birds (owl and little owl), the first being a sort of vulture. What you need to know about these birds is that in Leviticus 11, both are listed as being ceremonially unclean—detestably so! So what he is describing now is not just the illness, but the social isolation of illness, grief and loss. He even states some enemies are gloating over his situation. (v. 8). The famous Bible scholar William Barclay once lost a daughter in an accident. One of Barclay's detractors, who thought Barclay's theology was too liberal, wrote him an anonymous letter and said, "God killed your daughter so she wouldn't live to be corrupted by your theology." Barclay said if he had known the address of the person, he would have written him, "Your God is my devil."

And that leads to the third way ***our psalm deals with how illness, grief and loss have impacted his relationship with God.*** It's true, that in the moment of pain, the psalmist feels the back of God's hand. See v. 10. But don't blame God. One of Baptists' great ethicists was T.B. Maston. He and his wife had a son, Tom Mac, born with cerebral palsy. For his entire life, his parents had to feed him every bite he ate. He couldn't talk, but he could communicate. Maston said of his son, "He's a great guy, and we love him." And then he would talk with students about God using tough situations to strengthen us and make our hearts tender with mercy, for the sake of our ministry to others. Then he would add, "Don't blame God for everything that happens."

Remember what we have said all through this sermon series—God is good; God does not inflict suffering; God is with us in it. In 1 Peter 2:24, the Apostle declares, "By his wounds (stripes) we are healed." I take that to be true at several levels. First, by his wounds, he takes my place, offers forgiveness and liberation from sin. Second, even when physical healing cannot come, Christ can heal us emotionally and mentally to deal with our pain. He can heal us of doubt and self-hatred, as if it's our fault. Third, he will ultimately heal us completely in the resurrection life. Our job is

to claim the first two and patiently wait for the third one. And to acknowledge that the mystery of illness, grief and loss is above our pay grade.

Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote, “We go to God for answers, but sometimes what we get is God’s presence” [*Pastrix*, p. 86]. So we need to be as honest as the psalmist is in our prayers, learning to pray the tough prayers, so that when we pray the joyous, thankful ones, they mean more.

Many of you know the first part of the story behind the song, “It Is Well With My Soul.” The author of the words, Horatio Spafford, was a successful lawyer and businessman living in Chicago with his lovely wife and children. In November of 1873, he sent his family on ahead on an ocean liner. It crashed and sunk. His wife survived but all four children perished. Spafford booked passage on the next available ship to join his grieving wife. Spafford reportedly wrote these words while on that voyage.

What many don’t know is that after this, Spafford rejected the strict, harsh Christian doctrines of his past—ones which implied God caused this tragedy--and settled in Jerusalem. On my recent trip to the Holy Land, one of my friends visited the site of Spafford’s settlement, now converted into The American Colony Hotel. In that hotel, a handwritten manuscript copy of “It Is Well” is there, written on the stationery of a Chicago hotel. So in good times (“When peace like a river...”) and in horrible times (“...when sorrow like sea billows roll...”), it is well with our souls. We can trust God.