

From the Pulpit of Keith Miller
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Who Am I When I Have Lost So Much?

Psalm 139; Habakkuk 3:16-19

Introduction

Elizabeth Elliot, who suffered the death of her first husband, Jim Elliot, when he and four of his missionary partners attempted to make contact with the violent and unreached Waodani tribe in Ecuador, were speared to death on January 8, 1958. After coming back to the United States in 1963, Elizabeth married her second husband, Addison Leitch, a professor of theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, in 1969 who later died of cancer in 1973. In 1977, she married Lars Gren who was a hospital chaplain and traveled all over the world with Elizabeth as she became a popular author and speaker world-wide. Lars and Elizabeth enjoyed 38 years of marriage until her death in 2015. If anyone understood loss, I would think Elizabeth Elliot did. Of the twenty-four books she authored, at least ten of them touched on suffering and loss.

I was listening to a series of lectures given by Elizabeth Elliot this past week on suffering and the cross of Christ. She defined suffering in a way I had not heard before that I want to share with you, “Suffering is having what you don’t want and wanting what you don’t have.” Inherent in suffering is loss. I believe loss can be defined in the same way, don’t you think?

There are two experiences in my life that I did not want. I did not want my parents to divorce when I was twelve years old. Thirty-three years later, I still feel the loss I suffered from their divorce. The second experience, that I continue to feel loss from, is the death of my father; even though it happened just over 21 years ago. “Suffering is having what you don’t want and wanting what you don’t have.”

So far in our series on identity, we have heard stories from three people who have suffered loss on some level. The perceived loss that comes with loneliness, the loss experienced through depression or suicide, and the loss felt through disease or disability. The prophet Habakkuk also suffered loss, but his loss would come in the form of God’s discipline over the nation of Judah through the Babylonian Empire that would come in the prophet’s lifetime. God warned through Moses and the prophets that if they forgot him and worshiped other gods, he would discipline them by removing them by force from the land promised to their ancestor Abraham (See Deuteronomy 28-30). For hundreds of years, God warned his people of what would come if they did not truly repent. Habakkuk understood that the judgment that was coming would be severe.

There are three things that Habakkuk did in chapter three that I believe serve as principles to help us navigate through the pain and suffering that loss can cause.

Remember Who God Is (v. 16)

The first two chapters in Habakkuk include a series of two complaints from the prophet and God's answer to those complaints. The first complaint had to do with why God was letting sin go unpunished. The second complain the prophet had to do with how a good God could use a more wicked nation (Babylon) to judge a less wicked one (Judah). In other words: "If you are holy God, why does sin go unpunished?" and, "If you are just oh God, why is there so much injustice?" Have you ever asked those questions before? Listen to Habakkuk's first complaint:

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes froth perverted. (1:1-4)

Have you ever questioned God like that? Have you ever cried out to God for help? Have you ever pleaded with him to intervene? Have you ever asked God, "How long shall I cry for help, and you not hear me?" There was a pastor of a Church in Pennsylvania who invested his life into mine, because he understood that God was calling me into pastoral ministry. He mentored me and I looked up to him. I am a pastor today because of his role in my life. It was devastating to me when he was fired from the church due to legitimate ethical reasons that disqualified him from being able to serve as my pastor. Of all people, this pastor should have known better! Where was God in all of this? Why did God allow the actions of this man to devastate a church and devastate my life?

God's answer to Habakkuk's complaint was not what the prophet expected, and it left him with more questions than answers: **"Look at the nations and watch— and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor"** (vv. 5-7; NIV).

This led to Habakkuk's next question about justice. How could a good God use an evil and more wicked nation to discipline those you promised to never forsake or abandon? In Habakkuk 2:2-20, God promises that he will not leave sin go unpunished and that the Babylonians will one day experience his wrath. However, the day of judgement for all the wicked would come in God's time and in God's way, but in Habakkuk's day, he would only know the judgement and disciple that was about to come upon his own people.

Notice how Habakkuk responded in chapter three: **“O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy”** (3:2). I like the way the NIV translated this verse better: **“LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.”**

Do you see what the prophet is doing in these verses? Even though he has a hard time understanding the timing of God’s response and what seemed to him to be unanswered prayers, he remembers that faithfulness and character of God. The prophet does the same thing David did in Psalm 139! In Habakkuk 3:2-15, he reminds himself that God is all-knowing, all-present, and all-powerful, and that even though he cannot understand God fully, he can fully trust that he is good in all that he does!

This explanation does not remove the fear the prophet experiences, knowing that what was coming and what he would eventually experience would be a type of loss unparalleled to anything else he would ever experience. Notice his response in verse 16, **“I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.”** In other words, “As I reflect upon who you are and what is coming, my bowels tremble, I am overwhelmed with remorse for my people, and I can barely stand on my own feet. However, I know you will do what is right both for your people and their enemies.

What will get you through whatever loss you experience will not be the opinions of another person, but knowing the God of Psalm 139 who not reverently and extraordinarily set you apart as one fearfully and wonderfully made in his image.

Understand God is All You Need (vv. 17-18)

The second principle for dealing with loss that we learn from Habakkuk is to understand that in light of what is lost, God is all you need. Everything else is transient. It all has a shelf life. Your house, your car, your bank account, what people think of you... all of it will be ashes or forgotten one day. Notice what the prophet anticipates losing: Even if I lose everything, I will still rejoice and find my joy in the God of my salvation.

What are you going to do when it seems that you have lost everything? When the harvest is in, everyone is happy. However, when the harvest does not come in and the barns are empty... what then? Consider the loss Habakkuk anticipates: **“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls...”** When I suffer the greatest of loss... what have I really lost? According to Habakkuk, what he may lose is the experience of God’s blessing, a full fridge, a warm home, enough in the bank, and a great 401K or IRA so that

he can retire. If he loses those things, what has he really lost? According to verse 18, the one thing Habakkuk will not lose is his identity that is rooted in and through a relationship with the God who fearfully and wonderfully made him in his own image. “Even though everything that I have enjoyed and have depended upon is cut off from me, **“...yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.”**”

Think about all that we have been considering from Psalm 139 in this sermon series. We are the only creature period that bears the image of the Creator. Our purpose, our life, and our thriving can only be found in the one for whom we exist. When death and disease rob us, or when pain of divorce becomes our reality—even when the wounds that are left are so deep—what have you really lost? If you have placed your faith and trust in Jesus as your savior the Bible says that you are not only forgiven, but that you are a son or a daughter of the all-knowing, all-present, and all-powerful Creator who is equally good as he is infinite! This is why William Cowper could write:

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense
But trust Him for His grace
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face

I can rejoice in the LORD and continue to find my joy in him when it seems that I have lost everything, because I really have not lost anything if I still have him. We can rejoice in the midst of loss because of who we are: **“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are”** (1 John 3:1)!

Trust That God is Greater Than Your Loss (v. 19)

Finally, when you have lost so much that it seems that everything has been stripped from you, the pathway to addressing your loss is to recognize that God is greater than your loss. Habakkuk concludes with these staggering words: **“God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.”** The NIV translates this verse (and I think it is a better translation) in the following way: **“The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.”**

I am not sure why the translators of the ESV decided to translate Yahweh to “God” when usually it is translated LORD. Yahweh is God’s covenantal name and is typically used to remind his people that he is a God who keeps his promises, remains faithful even when they are faithless, and will never leave or forsake his children. This is why Habakkuk concludes the way that he

does: “The sovereign, covenant keeping, infinite God who loves me will not abandon me even when I am left with nothing but him!” This is not all that he says though. It is Yahweh who is his “strength.” The Hebrew word for *strength* that is used is a noun, and it is typically translated **army**. In other words, the armies of the enemy may be coming, and not only will God use their evil intentions for his glory and the good of his people, but when the enemy does come, Yahweh is my army! Yahweh will fight for me! Yahweh will win my battles.

One of the ways Yahweh will win for his people is found in the second part of the verse: “...**he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.**” What are the high places? The high places are the dangerous mountain tops. Our confidence in knowing that God is greater than our losses and knowing that when it seems that we have lost everything, he will not lose us, that we are “enabled” to keep our footing when everything else is giving way.

When I think of Habakkuk 3:16, it is hard to not think of the great stress Jesus experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane where we are told that he sweet blood. Why did our savior sweet blood in that garden? It was because of us and for us. Jesus sweet blood because he was about to become our curse, our sin, and experience the wrath of God we all deserved so that we would only know the love of God and not his wrath. So, while anticipating the cross, Jesus prayed: “**Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done**” (Luke 22:42). So at the cross of Christ, all of heaven shouts: “**See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are**” (1 John 3:1)! What we gain in Jesus is that even when the barns are empty and the harvest does not come in, God will keep us and will not lose what belongs to him.

Conclusion

Some of you have experienced great loss. As your pastor, I wish I could give you an easy answer as to why God allowed you to experience the pain you have suffered through that loss. I know the pain of having a pastor disappoint you through his moral or ethical failure. Under the previous pastor, Meadowbrooke experienced significant growth and apparent blessing. Most of you were helped in your spiritual journey under Billy’s ministry as your pastor and it felt like a death when he stood in front of you to tell you that he would be divorcing his wife Rene.

There are two things that I know with great confidence: First, I am confident that long before Billy’s actions devastated and shocked many of you, God was already at work and moving in our church. Secondly, as heartbroken many of you were over the loss of your previous pastor, the person who suffered the greatest loss was his wife. Since being called to serve as your pastor, it has been my hope that a day would come when you could hear her story. Today I have asked her to share her story.