

## *Losses*

a message based on  
Psalm 42

Followers of Jesus:

Losses are as common as pavement on a city street. Yet our culture tends more and more to deny this reality. We are presented in our culture with two options, according to Walter Brueggemann. We fight against it; or we avoid dealing with it. The psalms of lament, on the other hand, teach us to deal with losses head-on. Someone expressed it to me recently in this way: we must face right into the pain of loss and work our way through what exactly it has done to us. Losses come in a variety of packages.

- Loss of a loved one (death).**
- Loss of a job (unemployment)**
- Loss of health (chronic illness)**
- Loss of a friendship because of a disagreement.**
- Loss of a marriage partner (divorce).**

The possibilities are endless.

The writer of Psalm 42 has experienced losses, too. Perhaps because of sickness, or maybe because of exile he can no longer go to the place of worship the LORD had chosen for his people to worship at. He expresses his loss with honesty; he expresses it with what we would call high emotions, longings, passions. He is in great distress.

- When can I go and meet with God? (Ps 42:2)**
- My tears have been my food day and night (Ps 42:3)**
- These things I remember as I pour out my soul (Ps 42:4)**
- Why are you downcast, O my soul? (Ps 42:5)**
- Why so disturbed within me?**
- My soul is downcast within me**
- ... all your waves and breakers have swept over me (Ps 42:7)**

It was two years after I had experienced the very personal loss of the death of my mother. I was walking to work one day when a neighbour called me over and we chatted. It just so happened that this man grew up with my mother, and he showed me some school pictures taken of them in their classes. We got to talking about her, and I said to him, "This morning I noticed something about

myself. When I get angry at someone, I withdraw from them inside. My heart moves away from them. I've noticed the same thing about my relationship with God. I withdraw from him, too. My heart moves away from him.” He looked at me and quietly said, “Maybe you should tell him so.”

I grew up believing that being angry with God was really wrong. But what if you are angry at him? Then what do you do? When I read a psalm like this I cannot help but wonder that part of the emotion he is expressing here is exactly that: anger. We know that one of the expected ways we deal with loss is with anger. We could be angry at ourselves, at someone else, or: at God. We can know for sure that when the writer of this psalm wrote verse 9, it was not without some emotion.

**I say to God my Rock,  
“Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I go about mourning,  
oppressed by the enemy?” (Ps 42:9).**

God has forgotten him (so it seems!). He is believing the taunt of his enemies who are basically asking, “So you say your God is good? Where is he now, then? What has become of him? Why didn't he prevent this tragedy from happening to you?”

**My tears have been my food day and night,  
while men say to me all day long, “Where is your God?” (Ps 42:3).**

Why? Why have you done this, God? Why is it that just when I needed you the most, you disappeared? Why have you vanished just at this crucial point in my life? Why?

**Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?  
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Ps 10:1).**

It seems, writes Peter C. Craigie, that God has deserted his people. It seems as though God has departed, never to return (Peter C. Craigie, “The Lament of an Individual”).

The longer it goes on, the more questions we have.

**How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and every day have sorrow in my heart?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me?**

**Look on my and answer, O LORD my God.**

**Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death... (Ps 13:1–3).**

The psalm invites us to cry out to God and let him know how distressed we are. God invites us not to hold it in – which is what we often do – but to let it out; to “pour it out” so that it gushes forth from our hearts into the heart of God. Hold nothing back. There's a difference here, comments Walter Brueggemann, between “dwelling on” loss, and “dwelling in” loss. When we dwell on loss, we keep talking about it over and over again. What does this do? It leads to self-pity. That is dwelling on it. Dwelling in it is different. It is facing directly into the wind of pain blowing on us. It is an honest, truthful expression brought to God in an offering of worship. It is waiting for God.

Notice how this psalm begins. It does not so much ask God, “Take this all away! It hurts way too much!” It doesn't expect God to DO something about the pain. What the psalm does is go on a search for God. Why search for him in our pain? We search because we know that God is not just a great “Idea.” God is not some sort of concept. God is Real. God exists. He is alive.

**As a deer pants for streams of water,  
so my soul pants for you, O God.**

**My soul thirsts for God, for the living God (Ps 42:1–2).**

I noticed something recently about the human body. I was out for a walk on a warmish day, and I recognized that my body needed me to drink more water. Water was missing from my consumption that day. In the same way it is especially in times of trouble that we will recognize our need for God. Not the God we would like to have, the one we imagine he is. The true God. The living God. Not the God of our fantasies. Michael Card asks, “Who is God to you? The Answer Man? The Fixer? Is He the theological Entity, frozen on the throne?” (Michael Card, “The Disturbing Faithfulness of God”).

Pete Wilson observes that we make a mistake when, in our times of trouble, we come to God expecting him to fix our pain. “If you place your faith in what God does, you'd better prepare yourself for frustration and disappointment” (Pete Wilson, “Choosing Whom”). Instead, what we need to count on from God is not what he will do; what we need count on is him; himself; his presence.

**By day the LORD directs his love,**

**at night his song is with me – a prayer to the God of my life (Ps 42:8).**