

Pandemic Series
Part 5. Loss and Grief©

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June 12, 2020

Pandemic Emotions

Part 5. Loss and Grief

How long has it been? For most of the world the pandemic has stretched into months, and we cannot clearly see the end of it. How long will it be? We cannot say, but predictions from public health experts keep moving the date further out. What each of us knows and experiences are multiple losses, each one bringing some kind of grief. Loss and grief pair up. What we lose we must grieve if we are ever to regain our balance, to once again create “normal life.” How do we do that?

Neither loss nor grief is new to you or me. We’ve been facing these all our lives, but now, in such a short time, the rate of loss and the depth of grief have accelerated. It is very hard to make sense of it all and to keep our balance when faced with so much negative and hurtful change.

The Backside of the Promise:

A principle my husband Larry, a physician, and I learned can help us now. Full of faith and zeal, highly motivated, we went off to live in the rain forest of Peru to serve the Amazonian peoples through medicine and Bible translation. We were a young family, with three little children, and a lifetime of expectation and preparation. We had so much to offer and were eager to give it. Yet, there were many hurdles, myriad obstacles to getting our new life underway—hepatitis, whooping cough, rabies, tuberculosis, extreme allergies, depression, and so many other things. Where was the fulfillment we had counted on?

Over and over again we encountered distresses and disappointment, things that should not be. Were they from God to test our faith, or from the Enemy to block our path? Discerning was terribly difficult. But we began to discover, as we laid claim to God’s promises to us, that each promise has a “backside.” For a promise to be meaningful, we discovered, we had to have a need. The need was the backside. It was in the need that the promise could be fulfilled. Being parents helped us discover this. When we made a promise to our children, it was for some future time, maybe just the next hour or maybe for next month. But the promise only made sense when we considered what they would need or want. That is the nature of a promise—it is for the time of need yet to come. God has given us at least 1,000 promises, each one written for us in His Word.

Let’s look at ten losses we may be encountering now because of the pandemic, compounded by other world events such as demonstrations which flare up into rioting. Five of these losses are tangible, visible losses. We can see them, touch them, measure them. We can see the need each one creates. Five of the losses are intangible, hard to measure and yet highly significant. They are just as real, and create needs just as real as the measurable losses, but they are more difficult to define and to talk about.

For each of these ten losses we find that God has given us many promises for resources. The loss is the “backside” and the “frontside” is the fulfillment of our need. Without need we would not experience the backside of the promise and never experience the frontside of divine provision.

Tangible and Visible Losses

1. **Loss to death**, of loved ones, friends, acquaintances, workmates. Not only do we lose someone to *death* but nowadays we likely suffer the loss of our *not being with our loved one* to console and comfort. This has direct impact on the one dying, and also profound impact on us--on our own idea of loyalty and sense of responsibility. We perhaps always imagined that being loving and loyal includes being with a suffering or dying loved one. Now we don't get to behave that way. This can *affect our sense of self*, reflect negatively on the kind of person we have believe our self to be, the kind of person we want to be. It hurts.
2. **Loss of work**, as millions have lost jobs. YOU may have lost yours ! A lost job means not only *loss of income* but of our *sense of security*. It means we have lost the chance to fulfill our *purpose*, as well as something *useful and productive to do* each day. I know awesome people in ministry who have just lost their jobs because funding is disappearing. This is a stark life change, as much for those of us in the non-profit, NGO sector as for others. Missions, churches, and other non-profits see shrinking income because of the chain of financial losses. This brings with it the questions of God's supply, since our income depends on what people “give to God.” Along with loss of job is *loss of work and team relationships*. Perhaps for you these are the most constant and enjoyable relationships in your life. Talking by phone or Zoom or Skype is just not the same. We can miss lunches together, coffee breaks, time at the water cooler. Being “at work” has so many facets.
3. **Financial losses** of all kind, even if we still have a job. Those of us blessed to still be employed usually face other financial setbacks, as financial well-being is many-layered. That extra home one has for retirement income may no longer bring in rent because the tenant lost her job, or one's “hobby for income” is shut down and one's savings shrink away, or future retirement income (frugally saved for later life) dwindles with current needs and cutbacks. Our loves ones, family and friends, have greater needs, and we need to choose how to go on giving in the face of all the losses; we have to share our “less” with those who need it more.
4. **Loss of daily life routines**, which give structure to life. Even though most of use don't say we appreciate dailiness, it does order our days. Upheaval of routine can set us on edge, make us listless. Suddenly you may be working from home, plus perhaps having to

home school your children. Now what marks the segments of your day? What schedule should you keep? No longer do friends drop in or get together for study or fun. The extended family seems out of reach. During lockdown or with stay-at-home orders dailiness can be too much—too much sameness! Who would have thought that the weekly grocery shopping would be longed after, just to get out of the house?

When my husband's plane was found torn apart in the river in the rainforest, and he and the pilot were missing, I suddenly saw the value of daily routine during the interminable day of waiting, waiting, waiting to know if they were dead or alive.¹

Routine

We say that we despise you,
humble hum drumming.
We grumble for free
schedules,
less every-dayness.
But routine,
you are our rescue
when crisis comes,
disguising our emptiness,
dulling our despair.
Your very presence
cheers us.
We cling to your bosom,
hold tightly to your hand,
for you let us hide
in your ordinary
everydayness
until we are composed
and our brittle selves are mended
with your glue.

¹ Fortunately, they were alive! A massive storm caused the quarter-mile wide river to rise 16 feet in about two hours, ripping the float plane from its mooring in the middle of the night. The only communication was the airplane radio--gone. At dawn, a missionary 90 miles downriver reeled in the fuselage and wings and risked his life to go up the raging river to find Larry and the pilot.

Dailiness

Forgive me, Lord
for my impatience
with the dailiness of life.

With you to know,
a thousand books unread,
great truths undiscovered,
how can I be content
with peanut-butter-jelly
sweeping floors and making beds?
(continued)²

5. **Loss of privacy**—or paradoxically, **isolation!** Which is worse? With one we sit alone, having lost companionship, and with the other we lack space to be alone. Many parents whose college age children have been forced home again say this is tough. They feel squeezed into too-small spaces, quarantined together. Any of us can feel alone even in a crowded space if no one else is on our “wavelength” to share our thoughts and fears. Being quarantined alone is perhaps hardest, while days pass with no conversation or sharing of daily life. No meals out; no one to share meals in. Introverts definitely have the advantage in this one, but even they can hear thoughts echo ‘round and ‘round in their heads.

Intangible but Highly Significant Losses

6. **Loss of sense of well-being.** Because the whole population is at risk and we do not know who has the virus, we feel on edge. This ever-present danger disrupts our sense of safety. This lack of physical safety gets generalized to the whole of life during such a time as this. Is there anything we can count on? Now layered on the pandemic dangers is the uncertainty of violence. When might it erupt near us or our loved ones? I feel this acutely, with rioting on the street in New York City where one granddaughter lives and watching the nightly news in other hotspots of violence and virus where my children or grandchildren live.
7. **Loss of a sense of fairness and justice**—Such a conundrum! Situations are so perplexing and confusing. For example, in some localities medical personnel are laid off while in other sites many face extreme overwork. It’s crazy making! Some of my good friends wait on the side-lines, as it were, not doing what they are trained to do, not giving care, waiting for local hospitals to fill up. These imbalances in systems are highlighted in the crises. For those of us enduring the pandemic in less fortunate and less resourced

² Dodds, Lois A. *We have this treasure*. The Corey Press, 1975. P. 70, 71

countries inequities are especially glaring and heart-wrenching. How can we make sense of it, where the concern is not for a respirator, but for enough rice to feed the sick, not for a hospital bed but for a clean hammock?

8. **Loss of candor.** If we are privileged during the pandemic to still have a job and a home, and no virus, it seems petty to tell the truth about our frustrations and inconveniences. What we face and feel may seem inconsequential compared to other people's greater losses, so it feels embarrassing or ungrateful to complain. Yet, at each level of deprivation talking about it is good for mental health—a stress reducer. It helps us keep our balance. If you can't tell someone that you feel like screaming at the screeching three-year-old or the other children suddenly underfoot all the time, or the teen you have spent a hundred thousand dollars so far to educate who *still* can't clean up their crumbs, you go a little crazy. We can admit it seems petty but talking about it helps. If we have suffered the major losses of a loved one our grief may make us mute and we find it especially hard to share our hearts. How can ordinary life go on for everyone else when we are bereft?
9. **Loss of faith.** Our faith may waver or be diminished in the face of the pandemic and other upheavals or catastrophes—so much loss, so much death. Where is God when it hurts? Where is God when all these bad things happen? Why do the innocent die? Any loss of faith is profoundly distressing, for what we have counted on may no longer seem possible or real. We pray. Does God still hear? We may feel numb, silent, finding it difficult to voice our prayers when grieving. In extreme it can even hurt to use our voices as we sit with the Lord and experience “the inner groaning” of which the Scriptures speak. We may enter “the dark night of the soul,” in which our “ever present” God *seems* absent. At such times, I pray, “When I am faith-less, You, Lord, are still faithful! Honor my little, faltering faith and give me more faith!”
10. **Loss of joy and enjoyment,** of pleasurable pursuits and fun—these can get squeezed out because we have to stay at home, or home is too crowded now (especially with young adult college age children back home or younger families taking refuge with the older generation). It may even seem frivolous or selfish to seek joy and enjoyment, pleasure or fun when so many people are suffering. Yet, we need these to be whole persons, to not allow losses and grief to diminish the light-hearted and joyful aspects of our selves. We need to somehow balance the difficult aspects of pandemic life with creating times of laughter and pleasure. With young children this is especially crucial, for they live in the present moment and lack capacity to think about “someday” in the future. In their development they need time, attention, love, diversity NOW. Today.

Losses and Promises

Loss of loved ones to death	“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” Ps. 116:15 To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. (I Cor. 5:3)
Loss of work	“Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Ps. 90:12 “Establish the work of our hands...” Ps. 90:17 He makes us to flourish. Psalm 93:12-15
Loss of financial resources	“My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” Phil. 4:19
Loss of daily routines	“This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Psalm 118:24 He gives us our daily bread. Luke 11:3 He renews us daily. 2 Cor. 4:16
Loss of privacy—or isolation with loss of companionship Our aloneness stands out	“I will never leave you or forsake you.” Deut. 31:6 & Heb. 13:5, 6. (For isolation.) “Love covers a multitude of sins.” James 3:20 ; I Pet. 4:8. (What we need lacking privacy.)
Loss of sense of well-being	“When you pass through the rivers... When you walk through the fire the flames will not consume you.” Isaiah 43:1,2 Even if father and mother forsake...Ps. 27:10 “In times of trouble he will hide me” Ps 27:5
Loss of sense of fairness and justice	The Lord loves mercy and justice. Ps. 61:7, 89:14; 100:5 “...the Lord requires of you... to act justly and to love mercy Micah 6:8 Someday he will make all things right.
Loss of candor; difficulty talking about our deprivations or frustrations.	“Share each other’s burdens...” Gal. 6:12 Tell him your fears...Ps 34:4-6, 18 Self-talk: talk to God and self--moment-by-moment and when downcast. Ps .42:5, 11
Loss of faith or diminished faith and trust	Even when <i>my</i> faith falters God does not change! He is still faithful. “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” Mt 9:24 Faith small as a mustard seed is enough. Matt. 17:20
Loss of enjoyment, joy, pleasure, fun.	A merry heart does good like medicine. Prov. 15:13, 17:22 Jesus asked the Father for us: “...that their joy may be full.” John 17:13 “Every good and perfect gift is from above.” James 1:17

What about Grief?

We know that grieving is a process. It's not "once and done." It comes in waves, and layers, and it ebbs and flows. It is not one simple emotion; it is highly complex with many nuances. I experience it as a layering of several emotions. Just like a musical chord consists of several notes or tones, with one "anchor note," grief consists of emotions which occur simultaneously. One emotion may be dominant, the others add depth and complexity. For example, when my daughter left home for the last time and would soon be married, I cried for two weeks. The Lord said to me, "Lois, why are you crying? Isn't it because of the wonderful life you have shared that you now feel the loss? Thank me..." I discovered the grief was in proportion to my gratitude for what we had shared. I shifted from predominant sadness to gratitude.

When my husband died, I was surprised to find that gratitude was the anchor note of my grief, layered with sadness, loss, shock, longing. The loss was so profound *because of* what we had shared—all that I was grateful for, our wonderful relationship and life was the very platform of the loss and source of grief. I called it "good grief," so different from the complex grief of my other losses. It was true that life would never be the same with Larry gone, and with my daughter gone and married. It was never the same, but I learned to live with both. When my niece was murdered by her drug dealer it was a wrenching, horrifying grief. Qualitatively it was very different. Grief was not just for our loss of her and all her suffering; we grieved also for the loss of all our dreams and hopes for her which would never be fulfilled.

It's helpful to remember that people grieve differently, even in the same family or even within a couple. Extraverts may react out loud, especially with talking and crying. Introverts may withdraw, mute in their sadness. Other differences relate to language, culture, religious beliefs. If we can accept these differences, we can express our empathy more appropriately. For some, we grieve with them in silence, for others in our listening and perhaps reflecting. For anyone, our acknowledgement of the loss, for what is irretrievable, is most helpful.

Antidotes for Grief

Our Father God offers us the most profound antidotes for our griefs. He *identifies with us* in our grief. He knew the most profound grief—the loss of His beloved Son Jesus. He suffered grief after grief, loss after loss, as He guided His people around the desert for 40 years and then carried them forward into the present time. Often, He expressed His grief. He told His people that in all their distress He too was distressed, and He sent the "angel of His presence to be with them." (Isaiah 63:9)

Besides identifying with us in grief, the Lord gives us these resources:

- His *presence with us!* We are not alone. He will never abandon us. Even if our mother and father forsake us, He will not! He said, "I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt. 28:20) He carries us close to his heart. (Isaiah 40:11)
- His *long-term perspective.* He made us for eternity. We already live in eternal life! Death is related to the material world of the body. The real person goes on living, in God's presence. He says that the death of His loved ones is "precious in His sight."

(Psalm 116:15) So in our own loss of a loved one, we know the person goes on living. “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” (I Cor. 5:3) We can visualize that person being in God’s presence, now complete and whole, healed of earthly limitations. He sees us, left behind. Nothing escapes His notice, not our loss of a hair or the sparrow that falls. (Matt. 10:29-31) “He has born our griefs and carried all our sorrows.” (Isaiah 53:4)

- His *Holy Spirit as comforter and encourager*. When He ascended to heaven, He told His disciples He was doing so in order for the Holy Spirit to be with them and in them full time and so that they could have full joy. (John 17:13) He wants us to have full unity. (John 17:23)
- His *power* to overcome our weakness, even our inertia when trapped in grief. His power is our energy for daily living. His strength is “made perfect” in our weakness. (2 Cor. 12:9)
- His *Word to guide us* in how we are to interpret losses and grief. He is the emotional God who created us in His image, and thus we too have emotions. Though we may try to process our losses rationally, it is the profound affective assessment of loss which leads to our grieving. It is the embracing of His gifts of love and care which brings us solace. His Word is “a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” (Psalm 119:105)
- His *promises*. In his letter to the saints, the Apostle Peter wrote astounding words for us! He says that God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. (II Peter 1:3) *How much is everything? Everything!!* You may thus say to the Lord, “Today for life I need...food, shelter, clothing...(whatever you need!) Jesus also said to consider “the lilies of the field...the birds of the air...” (Matt. 16:28; Luke 12:27) You may thus say to Him, “Today, Lord, for *godliness* I need the fruit of your Spirit in me: *patience, love* for those so hard to love, *joy* to uplift me, *peace* in this disturbed and chaotic world, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—I need all of your attributes, Lord to be godly today.” (Gal. 5:22) I have a little book which quotes 1,000 promises God made to us!
- His *body*. *He gives us each other*. Knowing we are not alone, that we are part of a family, a group, *his very body*, is His plan. Research study after study has shown the life-long benefits of belonging. We live much longer and are much healthier when we belong, especially to “the household of faith.” Our wise and loving God did not leave us alone—He gave us each other as well as Himself!

Summary

During this pandemic and time of social upheaval we are all experiencing many losses. Here we look at ten predominant losses and the grief which each one brings. We look at the “backside” of God’s promise, which is the need created by our loss, and the “frontside,” which is His provision for us. We see the many antidotes to our grief, beginning with God’s grieving with us and His presence. We look at many of the resources He promises and provides.