

Learning through Loss

Karen Pearce

COVID. Its expansive reach connected us to the world around us in an unprecedented way. Though we were masked and isolated physically, we bonded emotionally with every other person on the planet in the common elements of loss, sickness, death, and fear. As we recover from that period of loss, we thought it would be helpful to hear from missionaries who have experienced loss in different ways to consider the ways our common experience affects us, what we learn, and how we can move forward. I interviewed a few co-laborers about the losses they weathered in the recent past.

Those who shared their stories include:

- Rob in Central Asia, whose life and ministry was completely turned upside down because of COVID.
- Melissa in Europe, who has lost her physical health through Lyme's disease and cancer.
- Staci in Africa, who lost her husband unexpectedly and returned to the field.
- D. Ray in Richmond (formerly in Africa), who lost his wife very suddenly a few years ago. He is remarried and continues serving.

- Erica, who was expelled from her country of service in Asia and then lost her husband unexpectedly. She and her children are planning to return to the field.
- William* in Africa, whose child has embraced the LGBTQ lifestyle and distanced herself from family.
- Ryan, expelled from his country of service after being interrogated and stripped of his family's possessions.

These missionaries live in different parts of the world. They are in different life stages. They are in various stages of recovery, but there are some definite commonalities in their stories. Here are five nuggets of wisdom gleaned from their stories to help us when we experience loss and learn to grieve well.

Loss should be respected and lamented

Loss is hard, and to survive it, we must experience it with all its *warts*. We are prone to think that if we love Jesus enough, we will not grieve anything that is taken away. We are made in God's image, and he grieves. Genesis 6:6 says, "And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." Jesus' experiences in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross also capture the grief that our Savior bore.

The Bible teaches we are to share in the sufferings of Christ (Phil 3:10). Through this suffering we are made more like him (Rom 8:28-29). We read in Scripture David grieving for Absalom (2 Sam 18:33-19:8), Mary and Martha grieving for Lazarus (John 11:1-37), and Hannah mourning her barrenness (1 Sam 1:9-18). Grief is painted in broad strokes all throughout Scripture.

Missionaries who have experienced loss have all gone through a difficult journey, but in it they found that God not only allows us to grieve, but He also grieves with us.

D. Ray lost his wife, Kim, suddenly and unexpectedly. In his loss, he took five weeks away to begin the process of healing. He leaned into God as comforter. Healthy grief and lament involve us turning to God in our pain. As he comforts us (2 Cor 1:3-4), we become more intimate with our savior. Here are D. Ray's words: "Lament is born in brokenness. Biblical lament leads us to turn to God alone, risk the discipline of complaining to God, turn our complaint into a request and ask of God, and then rest in faith by trusting God."

Only by our turning to God will the loss we experience be made into something beautiful. Isaiah 50:11 warns us that finding comfort in places other than Him leads to more loss and darkness. Romans 8:28-29 however, tells us that God can and desires to use our pain for good, for our sanctification. This turning to God means that you and I can express our emotions to him. Wrestle through your thoughts and feelings with Him. He understands and will minister to you in a way that only He can.

Here are other examples of missionaries expressing their emotions. Erica admits that when she was forced to leave the country she called home, she was angry: "I can honestly say I was angry at God when we left. I had to hold my children while they wailed themselves to sleep at night. The Lord had done that to our family." For William*, experiencing his daughter walking away from faith and family left him with a sense of betrayal by God: "I battled with trusting God in the same way. I had *trusted* God with my daughter and did feel that he had failed me."

In each of these stories, as these missionaries expressed their emotions and their fears to the Lord, He drew near, and he comforted like no one else could. He knows the agony of losing a child or being rejected by them. He knows the pain of death and loss. He knows the humiliation and hurt of rejection. As our high priest, he knows (Heb 4:15-16) how we suffer and intercedes for us (Heb 7:25).

As we lament with God, our hearts are intertwined with His. So, in a time of loss, grieve. Feel everything you feel. Embrace the pain. Share it all with the Lord, and let him bring hope and healing.

Loss strips us of our idols and reminds us of our true identity

Loss strikes us at the core. God gives us good things as his children. It is right that we love those things and enjoy them. But when he takes them away or allows them to be taken from us, the gaping hole results in our feeling empty and confused, alone and grasping for answers and direction. As we begin a journey toward healing, we must realize again our identity. Our dependence on God becomes greater as he strips away the very thing that we had grown to depend on. This process reveals our identity anew.

Melissa in Europe has struggled with her health every day for years. She was first diagnosed with Lyme's disease and then with cancer. Her medication leaves her in weakness and pain. She sums up her experience as a true identity crisis. She said, "if I'm honest, I would have to say that I have experienced a loss, my loss is – me, or at least me in the flesh. But that is a good thing."

She explained as her health dwindled and her body was wracked by pain and weakness, she became ever more aware of God as her strength. She came to understand in a new way how this treasure is in a jar of clay for His glory (2 Cor 4:7), and anything she does is clearly because this all-surpassing power is from God and not from within herself.

Ryan had to leave a zero-to-one ministry in an Asian country. Through leaving, he realized anew how his ministry really was not about him at all. "I have learned to maintain the perspective that I'm not the answer. Jesus is the answer. I'm not the answer for their church or faith but I'm here to point them to Christ and I can do that from anywhere," he said.

Loss brings these truths home to us as it strips us of the things that prop us up. It forces us to rely upon the Lord alone to fill those empty places.

Loss, death, sadness, and grief are part of life in a fallen world. But because God uses everything to bring Himself glory (Col 1:16) and to make us into the image of his Son (2 Cor 3:18), we can rest knowing that He is going to make this loss into something beautiful (Isa 61:3). He helps us remember again that our identity is in him.

Recovery from loss requires time in the Word

When our lives are upended by loss, it throws our normal rhythms into chaos. Whatever good thing God takes away leaves us a bit spun around. We may have difficulty making sense of our experience. But, each of the people interviewed reported that leaning heavily into God's Word was pivotal in righting themselves.

D. Ray said on the morning after Kim passed away, he woke up and "In the beginning..." came to mind. "It was like I was freefalling and then I landed on a bedrock." At the loss of his wife, he "doggedly pressed into faith and literally preached the gospel to myself," D. Ray said.

Melissa, in Europe, said that the only book she has energy to read anymore is the Bible. "Being sick saps my energy. I don't have time for anything extra."

As Ryan was being interrogated about his job in a closed country, he was undergirded mostly by Scripture. "I remember lying in bed the night of my interrogation. I had to sleep over at [the interrogator's] place. Having a healthy understanding of suffering. I was lying there thinking, 'Well, if God is good and sovereign over all things and everything he gives us is for our good, he gives good gifts, then that means that Rom 8:28 is true. This is given to me to conform me more into God's image.'"

Erica in Asia felt completely overwhelmed after her husband David died, but she found her strength in the Word: "I daily abide in him and his word. It's my manna. I don't put one foot on the floor before I commit my day to the Lord because I'm not doing this in my strength. If it were up to me, I would

be crawling in a hole with the covers over my head. It's the strength of the Lord." Staci in Africa echoed the same sentiment at her husband's passing. "I felt so overwhelmed, so what did I do? I preached the gospel to myself."

A clear understanding of calling is pivotal to surviving the loss

A missionary's sense of calling can be both a comfort and a source of confusion when loss occurs. Most missionaries have an unwavering sense of calling to our life's work. Because God helped us get where we are, doing what we are doing with whomever we are doing it, we are sometimes disillusioned when God allows a change to take place. The sudden loss of a spouse or health or children or ministry throws everything into a tailspin. In this place, we are forced back to our knees to figure out what God is doing.

The Lord used such a time to test Erica's faith and to redefine calling when her family was expelled from their country. "We were no longer among the people we were called to. So, what are we called to?" she asked. "We are called to relationship with God. We are called to share the truth of the gospel to the nations and to go out and minister to those who are hurting and in need. No matter where we are. God taught us that he had called us to first to Himself, secondly to be the church, and finally to the people he puts you with." Likewise, when Ryan and his family were expelled from the Asian country where they had lived for 10 years, God taught them that "he doesn't call us to a place. He calls us to himself."

When Rob and his family were isolated during COVID lockdowns, the calling God had placed on their lives helped them wait patiently and trust that God was not taken by surprise. "Over the course of our 17 years of serving in Central Asia, we have often looked back to the clear and obvious ways that the Lord has moved to get us to the exact location (country, city and neighborhood) where He wanted us to be. So If I ever found myself lapsing into questioning our situation about where we were planted and what we

were doing, my wife was good about reminding me about how God had moved to put us right where we were,” he said.

William also found comfort in the security of his obedience to the call God had placed on his life when his daughter walked away from her family and God during college. Just before this situation began, he and his wife had prayed through the Voluntary Retirement Incentive decisions and felt certain they were to be right where they were. But when his daughter began to distance herself and make lifestyle changes, he was tempted to think that maybe things would’ve been different if they had not been overseas during the tumultuous time in their daughter’s life. God then reminded William of this clear calling. “The certainty of our obedience helped tremendously,” he said.

For Erica, D. Ray, and Staci, losing a spouse forced them to ask hard questions. But in each case, God reminded them that their calling was still valid, even if everything looked different going forward.

“My circumstances have changed but my God and calling haven’t,” said Erica. Likewise, Staci was certain of her call before she met her husband, and she had loved Africa since she served as a journeyman. The decision to return alone was not a hard one to make, because her calling was so strong. “This seemed to be the place where his death would matter,” she said. “Anywhere else I would just be a widow. But these people walked through his illness and death with me, and I thought God would use that here more than anywhere else.”

As D. Ray was grieving the loss of his wife, God reminded him of his call: “After telling *our* story from the past twenty-seven years, I was reminded of something keenly important: Kim and I had been co-laborers. This mission calling was *our* calling. It was not simply my calling or her calling. I was tired, grieving, and weak, but I had a glimpse of a renewed spirit that just might be out there on the horizon. I was sensing a rebirth of purposeful service.”

Loss highlights God's faithfulness

In every testimony of these missionaries was a common theme—God is good and faithful. It is paradoxical how we experience such pain and grief yet come through it stronger and more sure of the goodness of God. God does this for us in several ways.

We see it through the way His people, our community, step up to support us in times of need. We see it in the way that good things result even through something difficult. In the midst of loss, our colleagues have seen ministries flourish, people saved, churches started, and love poured out generously in Christian fellowship. And, God is consistent to let us use all that we learned through loss to bless others.

The most important way that God is faithful is that he continues to walk through the fire with us. Just like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan 3) experienced, God is there with us. Said Staci, “It’s one of the upside-down things about our faith. God didn’t answer the way I would have wanted, but my faith has grown. My dependence on the Lord increased and I’m grateful that I had to depend on him. The Lord has been very near.”

As missionaries, we are not immune to the suffering and pain that come through loss. In fact, we are most uniquely equipped to survive and even thrive in its wake because of Jesus. While the profundity of loss does not escape us, it does not define us, either. Melissa summed it up well: “I think to the world it appears as a loss, but, in reality it’s a huge gain. To know Christ more deeply. To want less of self and more of Him. As believers, we know that is the goal, but He is gracious to nudge me towards that goal every day.”

Books the interviewees found helpful

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