



*Expressing Grief and Seeking
Strength in Arab Culture
and Scripture*

Sitting in a guest room with sweeping desert scape to the south and a scrappy dusty village to the north, we sipped on coffee and asked two young Bedouin women, Fatima and Maryam, about how they pass the time. To our delight, Fatima shared that she loves reciting poetry. The poem she chose to recite for us may be translated:

*Conceal your wounds. Do not bring joy to your adversary.
Persevere. You see, an excess of complaints is humiliation.⁵*

We asked them their opinion of the wisdom in the poem. Both agreed wholeheartedly that if you express pain you risk losing your dignity and become vulnerable to your adversary, so it is wiser to be strong and silent.

In my second year of language learning in the Middle East, my language tutor Khadija shared with me over many hours her deep grief at the tragic death of her husband, without even getting close to tears. Another time, she described when she visited a friend, Basma (also known to me), whose father had died. In her grief, Basma had become withdrawn and non-communicative. Khadija walked across the room towards Basma, and slapped her across the face, telling her, "This is life. We will all die. You need to be strong." She proudly reported to me, "She came to, stood up and started helping her family." I expressed my surprise at these things to Sabreen, another Bedouin friend, and Sabreen told me, "You are surprised because you're not a

اكتفم جروحك لا تفرح معاديك / واصبر ترى كثر الشكاوي مذلة⁵

strong person.” Displaying strength and despising weakness and sad emotions is a core value in Arab Bedouin culture.

On top of this cultural value of strength, there is a religious layer. It is often said among Arab Muslims that you must not complain because it is your duty to accept whatever God’s will is. In fact, by persevering without complaint in hardship now, you can pay off some of your bad deeds and make your entry into paradise faster. This belief is rooted in a theology that God created the world with evil and death in it, fully intending that we would suffer in our lives, and that this is a test,⁶ designed to show whether we are among those who persevere in faith, submitting to God and praising him in everything, or are among those who do not. In asking Arab women about hard things in their lives, it can require considerable probing to get beyond the answer, “*alhamdulillah* (Praise God).”

And yet, that day sipping coffee with the poetry loving Fatima, we discovered that her sister Maryam loves to sing. She sang for us a traditional Bedouin song (*anshouda*), which to our (unattuned) ears sounded mournful. She told us that she loves to sing sad songs much more than happy songs because they express things in your heart you can’t express otherwise.⁷ Is this difference merely due to personality? Or does it perhaps hint at some complexity in Bedouin expressions of grief?

⁶ Surat al-Baqara 2:155-157

⁷ When we reviewed our recordings afterwards, we discovered the song she sang was actually a love song about mothers, with lyrics that are adoring rather than sad. “Oh mother, spring of tenderness, the fragrance of a place’s soul. / You are the treasure of remaining days and more precious than eyes.” It was interesting that she described it as a sad song. But if sung in a mother’s absence, of course, could be an expression of sadness.

The Dilemma of Walking Alongside Suffering

In both my personal and professional counselling life in the Middle East I hear many stories of grief and trauma. Beliefs about what may be expressed, and in what way and context, are crucial to understanding how to walk alongside people. But many of the answers still perplex me. As westerners, expression of grief and trauma and its acknowledgement by others is usually viewed as healthy. Often a counselling response to trauma will be to elicit descriptions of the emotions or the pain, to name them and validate them. Helping someone with post-traumatic stress disorder describe their confusing anger outbursts, or exaggerated startle response, for example, and then helping them see the connection with the traumatic event they experienced, is an important first step to recovery.⁸ I often advocate to people the benefits of tears. However, some Arabs would judge my attempts to draw out a friend's description of their grief as not just undesirable but damaging. Should I be encouraging clients and friends to "talk it out" in a culture where there such aversion to the idea? Or is this aversion less all-encompassing than it first seems?

Furthermore, it raises the question as to how these cultural perspectives on grief and comfort impact the ability of people to hear the gospel. A core message of Scripture is one of human inability. The Scriptures are full of the prophets' failures, unapologetic depictions of the failures of God's people, full throated laments about evil in the world, and God's own grief over evil and death (Genesis 6:6; John 11:35). Then God himself is humbled in human form, humiliated by the powerful, and killed, before

⁸ Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, (London: Penguin, 2014), 1172, Kindle.

we see his vindication and victory. It would seem that an acceptance of one's own weakness is an essential pre-requisite to receiving the gospel.

This article will consider some of the ways Arab Muslim perspectives on suffering affect their expressions of grief and their expectations of offering comfort. Then we will consider how Scripture shapes our comforting practices, our sharing of the gospel, and our planting of fellowships of new believers who become comforters. In order to do this we will consider three contrasting experiences of suffering that are prevalent in the Middle East; that of the death of a family member, the multi-layered suffering of a refugee, and the silent suffering of women who have experienced shame-evoking abuse. Throughout, I will make observations of Arab Muslim culture, by definition limited, drawn largely from my fairly conservative part of the Middle East, and filtered through my Western eyes.

The Death of a Family Member

As I sat in the funeral of my first real friend in this country, the women poured into a tent erected in the nearby laneway, and all uttered the same words of comfort, "May God have mercy on her," "May God make her place in Paradise," "We are all on the same path," and "We belong to God and to God we will return."⁹ Most conformed to the advice I have often heard here, to resist crying and mostly avoid mentioning the deceased. The words spoken convey clearly the Islamic understanding that death is part of the testing that God intended for our lives and that merit is earned by avoiding complaint and by praising God.

⁹ This last encouragement is a direct quote from the Qur'an, Surat al-Baqara 2:156

On small tables around the tent are booklets, sections of the Qur'an, that guests can recite from, playing their part in recitation of the whole Qur'an over the three days of the funeral. Along with helping to provide food to guests, or to the poor, and offering prayers for the soul of the deceased, this is part of increasing the deceased's merit with God (*hasanat*) and easing their route into paradise.

One of the Arabic words for solidarity literally translates "standing shoulder to shoulder." This shoulder-to-shoulder presence of the community at a funeral, and later in visits, is essential for supporting the family. However, playing one's part in earning merit for the deceased is also a highly practical act of support directly impacting the eternity of the deceased. Encouraging the family to praise and not complain is a form of solidarity with concrete spiritual benefit—merit. A Syrian friend described to me how important the particularity of these traditions are in sensing solidarity. For example, in her part of Syria after the funeral everyone visits the bereaved family every Thursday afternoon for weeks afterwards, offering prayers and standing with them. Now outside Syria, the absence of this Thursday tradition adds to her grief.

Yet despite the encouragement against expressing sadness, at one point in the funeral an older aunt began wailing, and the deceased's sister wailed in response. They continued to pause and then set each other off again in a sirening escalation of wails. Others sat around looking uncomfortable until a more religious sister came and physically pulled them away from each other. In my time in this country I have seen more intense expressions of grief than in my home country, even if they are a minority. One friend scratched her chest until it bled. Another friend fainted and was taken to hospital. I've heard numerous accounts of aggressive outbursts in hospitals after doctors informed a family of a death. It is common here to fear that bad news will

cause damage to health, including heart attack, stroke, or death. For this reason one friend's sister has, months later, not been informed that her uterus was removed during a dangerous caesarean section, despite the family knowing. The violence of grief is feared, which perhaps strengthens the warnings against expressing it.

Is this focus on a communal, action focused style of comforting something we should learn from, or is it something that blocks Arab Muslims from the gospel? We will return to this question later.

The Refugee Experience

While bereavement is considered normal and family focused, the grief and trauma of the refugee experience is complex and widespread. It is, at the same time, a grief shared by millions, and yet community and trust is fractured. It brings a humiliation and loss of identity that bereavement does not. Family roles are lost as men are not allowed to work and widows carry financial burdens. Poverty is chronically stressful and frightening. Yet, one friend has said that among all the traumas of the war, the most significant thing is that people are separated from their families. In addition, many regional traditions that draw community together in celebration and expression of their solidarity are lost. The very connections that could strengthen in times of suffering are no longer available.

As in bereavement, Syrian Muslims view their refugee experience as a test in which they must persevere without complaint. In a group of women, if one complains too much, the phrase "*alhamdulillah*" might encourage her to move on. Some in poverty will not seek assistance from charities to guard their dignity. Yet others, with encouragement, will almost pour out their grief, visibly relieved at being able to speak. Sometimes sitting with a group of women, after one admits that she is "emotionally

exhausted,” others will quickly follow expressing a need for help. Is it the depth of loss, or some characteristic of Syrian culture that opens up this expression of weakness? In contrast to bereavement, in which the complaint is against God, perhaps a greater sense of being wronged by humans justifies the refugee complaint.

In contrast with Syrians, conversations with Palestinian refugees feel different. Obviously, theirs is a much older grief. Since 1948, the communal lament, anger, and protest has been diversely expressed in art and music, in the political sphere, and in the stories that are passed from grandparents to grandchildren.¹⁰ Sadness is expressed, such as in this postcard in a Palestinian shop, “If the olive trees knew the hands that planted them, their oil would become tears.” Yet, in the words of Eman, a Palestinian friend, Palestinians should be proud because they are “strong, courageous people, warriors, who have done what they can, thrown rocks as weapons, and most importantly, after all this time they have never given up fighting.” Various factors probably contribute to this greater anger and commitment to the fight for Palestinians compared with Syrians, including a hated external enemy and the conviction that God is on their side in this battle for the holy city. These differences seem to legitimate their protest, which is a call for the solidarity of others in the fight, a call that Syrians here do not express.

And yet the Syrian response is far from defined by weakness. Courage can be seen in the perseverance of a mother to provide for her children in leaky housing, winter after winter. Its fruit is a new skillset of networking with other Syrians to share

¹⁰ One language tutor described to me how foundational these grandparents’ stories are passing on this sense of Palestinian identity for those living outside the land, and yet also how powerful they are in fuelling a hatred towards Jews. She acknowledged that “Even if I meet a Jew in Europe who has never set foot on Israeli land I cannot escape my feelings of hatred for him. That is how we are raised.”

the latest news of vegetable vouchers from this church, or heaters and blankets from that charity. Pride is on view as Syrian food is cooked, shared with neighbours, and declared to be the most delicious of Arab foods. Doggedness is seen in a mother of eight children chasing down doctors to get surgery to help her toddler with cerebral palsy walk, despite a disinterested husband. Glimpses of hope are seen in the tenderness of older brothers walking their little brother to school to protect him from the neighbourhood bullies. These family relationships remain the defining community and source of strength for people.

Are refugees more in need of hearing words of lament or of courage? How can lament be offered in ways that do not diminish people's sense of dignity? How can words of courage be offered without feeding the message of stoicism and self-reliance? We will return to this question below.

The Silent Suffering of Abuse

Many Syrian refugee women experience an increase in gender-based violence because the refugee experience heightens their vulnerability. One woman I worked with was gang raped by soldiers in Syria. Many Syrian women in poorer areas are afraid of racist sexual harassment on the streets. I have met numerous teenaged girls who were (illegally) married by their families at 13, 14 or 15 years old, partly because it is Syrian tradition and partly because poverty convinced their families that marriage would secure their future. It is not unusual for mothers-in-law to teach their sons to beat their wives. The stressors of unemployment and poverty for men often create an unbearable loss of identity and sense of failure, to which some men respond with more violence.

The cultural route for challenging domestic violence is for a woman's own family to step in and support her divorce or hold her husband accountable. However, women are often told by their family that a dutiful wife tolerates beating and keeps her husband happy. The family of many refugee women are not in the same country, making any action near impossible. If a woman does leave her husband, she will carry a stigma, because it is her duty to stay. Custody laws often leave women feeling there is no option but to stay and endure violence.

In the past few months I have worked with six unrelated young women who sought medical help and were referred for counselling. Three have undiagnosed bowel problems, one has muscle weakness with no physical cause, two cut themselves with razor blades to escape their internal pain (not to suicide). Of these six, four were married between 14 and 18 years old, and are now divorced, and each experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse and/or torture from their husbands. The two others experienced child sexual assault from a relative. Each one says, "I cannot tell my family about the abuse." Of course, in the West it is also profoundly difficult to speak about sexual abuse. However, for many conservative Arab Muslims, to share this with even the most trusted family member seems to be viewed as not only profoundly difficult, but self-destructive. Yet, if these physical symptoms are expressions of psychological pain it is likely that they are exacerbated by being unable to speak.¹¹ As both an outsider and a professional I have the privilege of being a less threatening option.

¹¹ Mary Frances O'Connor, "Grief: A Brief History of Research on How Body, Mind and Brain Adapt," *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 81 no. 8 (2019), 731-738, <https://doi.org/10.1097/PSY.0000000000000717>.

One friend, who is a believer, explained the choice of silence like this:

The only thing that will enable someone to recover from that kind of abuse is to see herself as strong. The greatest threat to recovery is feeling weak. But from the time she shares that information with her sister or mother, they will always view her as weakened. And every time she looks in their eyes, she will remember that. However, if she keeps silent, in time she will recover.

For a long time, I was perplexed by the paradox that confiding about sensitive matters is so hard in this communal culture, while in my individualist culture vulnerable information may be shared quite freely. As I watch women navigate control in their own lives, I've learned that it is precisely because of the interdependence of communal cultures that sensitive information is risky. In a communal culture your marriage, travel, housing, and finances are all family choices. Therefore, guarding your family's perception of you from weakness or shame is of utmost importance. The husband of a sexually spoiled woman has the right to divorce her. A divorced mother who hints at any mental illness may lose her children. The brothers of a sexually harassed young woman are obliged to beat up or kill the offender and she is left with a brother in prison. Sensitive information in western culture is far less damaging because family members have less control over one another.

So, how are women expressing hidden shame or pain? We began this article hearing about a Bedouin woman's love for sad songs because "they express things in your heart you can't express in other ways." Sad songs seem to be a common love here. One of the six women above drew me a grey-scale sketch of a large eye with a single tear drop falling from it. A believing friend who was being beaten by her brothers for about two months changed her WhatsApp profile picture to a cartoon girl with

dishevelled hair and screaming. These are all indirect forms of expression which allow for a level of disclosure not possible in direct speech. It is likely some of the physical symptoms described in the women above are another, less conscious, indirect expression of trauma.

On top of these individual expressions is the growing communal voice opposing violence against women. The so-called honour killing of a 40-year-old woman by her father last July was followed with protests. Signs were carried saying, “This is for the ladies killed by the men who should protect them,” “There is no honour in crime,” and “Men of quality don’t fear equality.”¹² Many poorer women could never attend these rallies, but social media means these voices now filter through the closed doors of many homes.

What kind of expression of this silent shame is enabled by Scripture? What place in community does Scripture grant to battling this shame?

Scriptural Comfort

Scripture clearly gives us an imperative to comfort, and a unique privilege that we can do so “with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2 Cor 1:4). As believers in the God-man who entered into brokenness and defeated death we are enabled to walk alongside people who have experienced horrific suffering in ways that others are not. His patience with our brokenness enables us to offer patience to those for whom evil has left messy wounds. His utter control and goodness enable us to be a

¹² Abigail Roberts, “Video of father beating daughter to death in so-called ‘honor killing’ sparks protests in Jordan and online,” ABC News, July 23, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/video-father-beating-daughter-death-called-honor-killing/story?id=71903071>.

non-anxious presence. His grace enables us to offer a non-judgmental space for others to share vulnerable experiences. Langberg explains how our worship enables us to “face things as they actually are in this dark world without getting twisted” and our repentance enables us to walk with the traumatized in “humility, patience, compassion and comfort” rather than “pride and superiority, impatient that people are not better yet.”¹³ Let us consider how scriptural comfort interacts with the cultural value of community solidarity in grief, with choices about expression of lament or courage, and with the expression of the hidden shame of abuse.

Community Solidarity in Action

Are there things for us to learn from the communal solidarity and action-focused comfort of an Arab Islamic funeral? The willingness of people here to have a house full of people at their most vulnerable moments, and the commitment of the community to drop everything and be there for the bereaved, humbles me. I cannot but feel the challenge for my individualist instincts. While I may prefer a more verbally expressive style, I am challenged to acknowledge the non-verbal acknowledgement of pain in the presence and activity of the community. For those new to faith, the need for a spiritual family to stand with them in bereavement will be crucial.

The loss of this community solidarity for Syrians, while we would not choose it for them, has been used by God to open door for faith. Family and community are powerful maintainers of religion. Syrians who have lost this are freer than before to

¹³ Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2015), 72.

explore alternatives, and seeing these alternatives enacted in communities is crucial. Among those who have come to faith through my church's outreach a common story is being first impacted by Christians welcoming them as family and treating them dignity. While decisions about material aid in this ministry are complex, it is a practical outworking of the powerful experience of being family for each other.

Yet as we seek to offer comfort to unbelievers through action focused presence with them, we cannot offer solidarity in their merit earning or in their normalising the tragedy of death and suffering. Death and painful trials were not God's intent for his creation, rather, they are horrific consequences of our sin and represent his judgment over us. Our theology compels us to invite people to lament suffering and death however uncomfortable it leaves them. When I tell the creation story, people do not notice that death was not present, until I draw attention to it. I love to then share the quote before the Noah account, "When God saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth... it grieved him to his heart." (Genesis 6:5-6), and to share how when Jesus stood at Lazarus' tomb, although he knew he would rise from the dead, he wept over the wrongness and pain of death (John 11:33-35). Until our friends can lament their helplessness in the face of death, our words of courage, based in the confidence of the resurrection will be meaningless to them.

Words of Lament and Courage

So, what will culturally appropriate and biblical expressions of lament and urging of courage look like?

My experience here is that for those who already feel broken by deep pain the indignity of lament is overshadowed by the sense of relief in expressing the pain, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" (Psalm 13:1). Offering ancient biblical

voices validates their own lament and offers a new community to join, such as Hannah's voice "I was pouring out my soul to the LORD," (1 Samuel 1:15). I more recently noticed what follows, "Then she ate something, and her face was no longer downcast" (v18). Psalm 31 has many apt descriptions for the Syrian experience, "My eyes grow weak with sorrow... I am the contempt of my neighbours... terror on every side... I was in a city under siege." (vv 9-13, 21), along with beautiful expressions of trust "My times are in your hands, let your face shine on your servant, save me in your unfailing love." (vv15-16) Merely participating in lament is an act of trust in the God who did not intend this evil in the world.

Some refugees who have come to faith have testified that they needed an alternative way of understanding the evil that is done, rather than an angry God who is testing us. A crucial defining point for many is hearing of God as a loving father, whose testing of his children is always out of love, for our growth, with the promise of his presence and power and grace. In early stages of faith as a new believer it can be challenging to apply this practically, as they ask, "But if he loves me, why is life still such a battle?" A robust theology of suffering, and lament alongside confidence, is something that is grown into.

The constant urgings to be strong in a stoic culture tend to increase my leaning towards speaking of weakness. Yet, a biblical perspective values strength, and calls me both to honour the strength shown by those suffering and offer a way into courage for those feeling weak. Outside visitors to my church's refugee outreach sometimes get stuck in expressing their sadness to refugees they meet. A significant moment of growth for our team was when we discussed how to honour refugees' strength and dignity in our speech, such as asking them about their pre-war lives and their

successes in making life work here, not only their grief stories. This dignity is so important to give balance to lament.

As we offer a way into courage for those feeling weak, we cannot ignore how the biblical accounts of courage are so firmly rooted in the grace of God, not driven by the need to prove our faith. God's promise to be with Joshua was behind the command to "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged." (Joshua 1:9). God's promise of blessing enabled Abraham and Sarah to be heroes of faith as they waited (Hebrews 11:8-12). God's covenant promises for Israel emboldened Esther to put her life on the line for her community (Esther 4:12-16). Ultimately Jesus' completed victory over death is what allows us to tread fearlessly into whatever is ahead. This stark contrast to the self-reliant stoicism that silences weakness is a truer, more glorious strength.

We cannot make the gospel appealing to people who seek strength through aggression, avoid all sense of weakness and who despise any suggestion that Jesus was humiliated. The humbling of a heart is the work only of the Spirit. But we can speak unashamedly of the courage of our Saviour, who did not hide his face from mocking and spitting and yet set his face like flint in full confidence that he would be vindicated from shame (Isaiah 50:6-7). He did not avoid being shamed, but despised shame itself (Hebrews 12:2) and now is able to remove our impurities and shame (Colossians 1:22) and given us the solidarity of being raised with him and hidden us in him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).

Expressions of Abuse

How does the gospel enable expression of the silent shame of abuse? Being shamed is perhaps the ultimate threat to the solidarity so deeply prized in this culture. Dignity is

attacked at its core. How do we offer comfort without exposing people to greater hurt? Dale observes that it seems shocking to us how Jesus calls shamed women into the public eye, yet “rather than colluding with shame’s hiddenness, he exposes the situation for public vindication” and that this “allows the communal restoration of relationship and status.”¹⁴ This is a profoundly beautiful description of the restoration Jesus offers, and yet, it is shocking. We cannot choose on a woman’s behalf to expose her shame. We can introduce her to this Jesus who stripped shame of its power and offers us a place of honour. Yet how does this help us think about a shamed woman’s relationship with her community?

As we seek church fellowships to grow in a redeemed response to the shame of abuse, we take small steps with what is in front of us. For the many women stuck in ongoing abuse, rather than small steps it may be waiting on God. Sometimes I have wondered whether taking on the vague terminology women use, such as “that thing that happened” rather than “when he raped me,” is colluding with the shame. However, indirect communication is not silence and a black and white sketch of a crying eye may be a more profound expression of pain than what she can say in words. She may not feel able to tell anyone else in her family yet, but she might be able to listen to the testimony of a sexual abuse survivor on an Arab Christian women’s Facebook page. We can, and must, speak unequivocally of the evil and shame of the abuse and the abuser, which is not her own shame, and honour her ability to survive. We can offer a community of one safe person to speak with.

¹⁴ Moyra Dale, “Women’s Shame – 1” (blog), *When Women Speak...*, May 28, 2017, https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/womens-shame-1/#_edn15.

At the same time, we seek to grow gospel fellowships: communities with a renewed vision of what is shameful. We must not be naïve about the level of trust needed for women to share their stories. How do we disciple women to offer that kind of safety to each other? I quoted my believing friend above observing that the impossibility of sharing shameful stories comes from being seen as weakened (spoiled perhaps?). This 'seeing' of one another as disciples must be transformed according to how God sees us, restored and without shame. Those with a story to share will choose whether they trust their sisters' changed perspective. In the meantime, communal practices offer opportunities for indirect expression. The Lord's Supper may have a particular role in communally moving through sorrow, shame, cleansing and honour, and acting out the unity of Christ, even while some details cannot be shared.

One new believer has often told me of abuse by her husband. Recently he beat her severely when she was asking to go and visit her father. She was shaken by it but told me a week later, "I felt different than before, because I know that God is with me and loves me. For the first time, I told my husband's family that it was not okay for him to beat me and that it is my decision whether I stay or leave." This is her testimony of the Spirit at work in her, strengthening her in her new identity and rejecting the shame others placed on her.

Conclusion

We can learn from the role that community solidarity in Arab Muslim culture plays for strengthening in times of suffering. And yet the loss of this solidarity among refugees has opened doors for a new experience of community with believers. In place of self-reliant stoicism Scripture invites those who have experienced brokenness into a

community of lamenters; and offers the way into a courage founded on grace. For those silenced by the shame of abuse Jesus removed the power of shame over them and boldly restores women in community status. He gives us our own communities to learn together, one step at a time, offering each other the comfort that is without shame.