

Hope Springs Eternal
Hope in the Psalms of Lament
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The iconic 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*, starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell, portrays situations that endlessly repeat themselves with no resolution or recollection of the past.

Sound familiar? In fact, over the last few years, the United States Congress has enacted the same battles and played the identical budget-and-deficit game, kicking the can to the next year—and the next—without making any real progress.

There have been times when I've wanted to crawl back into bed and hibernate until spring. I have occasionally felt stuck—every step forward preceded two steps backward. There were days when I paid one bill only to receive two more in the mail.

Haven't you felt that way at times? Haven't you had days at work where all your efforts seemed in vain? Times when you seemed to fight the same battle over and over again with no end in sight? Times when you think that maybe the animal kingdom has it right: it's better to sleep your way through winter?

Murray's movie character, Phil Connors, is a cynical weatherman caught in a February 2 time warp. Once he recognizes this, he uses what he learns the first time to take advantage of that situation the next time. Although he begins every day with a clean slate, he usually spends it on meaningless activities.

When he pursues love seriously, however, he uses his previous knowledge to better the lives of others. His relationship with Rita (MacDowell) breaks the spell of endless Groundhog Days, enabling him to discover what is most important in life and the benefits of doing good rather than evil.

Connors experiences his own form of hell on earth because his initial evil involves no consequences. Eventually he realized that good is its own reward.

Alzheimer's Can Be Like That

Dealing with individuals with Alzheimer's—especially during the early and middle stages—can feel like the movie, *Groundhog Day*. You keep answering the same questions, repeating the same scenario, over and over again, with no resolution, no remembrance on the part of your loved one that you had already explained this repeatedly. Caregivers can feel frustrated because they feel they are getting nowhere fast. Even worse, they are losing ground as they realize that the disease's progression will only make things worse. Their time spent thoroughly explaining

something feels wasted when they have to answer the same question over and over again. There seems no redemption for those who feel trapped in a loved one's downward spiral.

Family members and caregivers can deal creatively with such circumstances, just as Murray's character does. Rather than repeating themselves they may use humor and diversions as the disease progresses, knowing their loved one won't remember. This is a frustrating situation that can be depressing: this feeling of getting nowhere fast.

Many of us like to feel a sense of accomplishment, that what we're doing serves a purpose and is going somewhere, moving us forward in life. We can get pretty frustrated when we feel that we're not making progress or going backward.

As I get older and start to deal with my own age-related health problems (knees that no longer allow me to run up and down stairs, ears that ring when no outside sound is present, and bones that are hollowing out), I have started to wonder: Is this all that I have to look forward to, only gradual decay and struggling to maintain what I have against future loss? How can I break this cycle?

Help from the Psalms

Psalms of lament can perfectly express such feelings of frustration and despair. Almost a third of the Bible's psalms are laments of individuals, indicating the prevalence and universality of such situations where individuals feel the need to call upon God in their sorrow and suffering.

Psalms 13, for example, follows the normal structure of a lament, with a complaint:

How long, Lord? Will you utterly forget me?
 How long will you hide your face from me?
 How long must I carry sorrow in my soul, grief in my heart day after day?
 How long will my enemy triumph over me? (vv. 2-3)

Followed by an appeal:

Look upon me, answer me, Lord, my God?
 Give light to my eyes lest I sleep in death,
 lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed,"
 lest my foes rejoice at my downfall. (vs. 4-5);

and ending in an expression of confidence in God's help:

I trust in your faithfulness. Grant my heart joy in your help,
 that I may sing of the Lord,
 "How good our God has been to me!" (vs. 6).

What beauty in this simplicity and sincerity of expression? We don't know the specific source of the writer's distress, but clearly it was protracted. Not only will the psalmist's enemies triumph, but his entire life's work is called into question if his enemies correctly interpret his death as divine judgment. The psalmist prays for healing as a sign of God's favor and that his faith has been justified.

"How long" is repeated four times, indicating the severity of his troubles. God appears to have forgotten all about him. God has even hidden his face. The writer is in pain, which his enemies' rejoicing only reinforces. He feels close to death. He clearly is depressed.

The Breakthrough

The psalmist doesn't remain in despair. Rather he puts his trust in the Lord and God's faithfulness. What the New American Bible translates as "faithfulness" is rendered as "steadfast love" in the Revised Standard Version, emphasizing faithfulness in loving. The psalmist's trust leads to song: "I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me" (v. 6, RSV).

This dynamic appears commonly in lament psalms. They end not in despair, but with confidence that God has heard the speaker's plea and will respond. Some psalmists are so confident of God's action that they respond as if God had already acted upon their request.

People caught in situational depression brought on by life circumstances—as opposed to clinical depression caused by a chemical imbalance and requiring medication—may find it hard to remember that life wasn't always this way. There have also been good times.

Such depression can feel as though it has gone on forever, without any remembered happy times. It colors our present as well as our past, which is seen only through a cloud of misery. Situational depression can rob the future of hope. People can feel trapped with no way out. But even in depression, dementia, Alzheimer's, or other age-related chronic ailments, there is redemption and hope.

Love Is the Answer

Where does this hope come from? It was love that brought Phil Connors out of an endless cycle of meaningless repetition in *Groundhog Day*. It was love that led him from selfish ways and into redemption.

Trust in God's steadfast love helped the writer of Psalm 13. It's the same love that can help us break out of the cycle of despair. Such love and concern for others moves us beyond focusing on our own troubles, enabling us to accept the love of God who always loves us first. This is love in its purest form.

We all have bad days, and for some those days go on longer than for others. If our self-worth arises only from accomplishments—getting ahead—then what are we to do when we are no longer able to do what we once did, when we are losing abilities rather than gaining?

Older adults often become depressed as they lose more and more physical abilities and start to ask, “Why doesn’t God take me?” Far too often, the medical community responds by prescribing more medication rather than dealing with the underlying questions of meaning, self-worth, loss of connection to loved ones, and loss of love.

If our self-worth is rooted in being beloved children of God, then even when we lose our abilities, when we are stuck in frustrating cycles, when we have nothing to look forward to except more loss, we will be able to rise above despair. This is doable thanks to our God who makes all things possible. We will be able to see our losses in this life as gain in our spiritual life—things that bring us closer to our God.

Present amidst the winter snow, hope springs eternal: hope for spring—for new life arising out of the old. Our God can turn winter depression into spring song. That’s what happened for the psalmist, and it will happen again if we put our trust in God.