

Ellipsis

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It happened again this morning. I was reading a devotional book that more or less adheres to the lectionary texts for the week, and I looked at the reading for the day: Psalm 92:1-4; 12-15. I have, over the years, learned to grow suspicious of omissions in texts, and before I even flipped open my Bible I was irritatedly wondering, “what about verses 5-11?!” I knew, more or less what to expect—a pleasant selection of the inspirational bits of a psalm with the nasty parts left out.

I was right.

The reading focused on how good it was to praise the Lord, to proclaim his love, to sing for joy, about how the righteous would flourish like well-watered trees staying “fresh and green” until old age. The parts of Psalm 92 that were *omitted* were the parts about the destruction of the wicked, the defeat of the psalmist’s adversaries, and about “senseless fools” who do not understand and are destined for the grave.

The former themes were obviously (and entirely appropriately!) deemed suitable for morning reflection. And the latter? What about them? Were they thought to be uncomfortable and awkward intrusions into a prayer of praise and thanksgiving? Embarrassing reflections of the psalmists’ feelings toward his enemies?

Inconvenient expressions of violence and ill-will in what was supposed to be a hymn of joy? Whatever the reasons, a decision was made on the reader’s behalf, and these verses were edited out.

Of course, we don’t just see this phenomenon in devotional books’ handling of Scripture. We are all familiar with the ellipsis—the three little dots that often appear in the middle of quotes and citations. I often wonder, “what are those three little dots hiding?” What is being omitted? Statements, ideas, and questions that are less *relevant* for the purposes of the one using the quote? Or less *convenient*? Sometimes it is the former. Sometimes there are parts that just don’t pertain to the point that is being made. But often it is the latter. Often, if I bother to dig up the citation, those three little dots represent a portion of text that either tells a more

complex story than the one using the quote wishes to tell or, at worst, outright contradicts the point they are trying to make. Whatever the case, the ellipsis puts me on high alert. "You've chosen to leave something out," I think, "and I want to know what and *why!*"

And yet, if I'm honest, I have to admit that I, too, use the ellipsis when citing authors or using Scripture. I use it to keep quotes brief and to keep them relevant to my point. I also use them for *exactly* the reasons I smirk at when I see it in the work of others—to reduce complexity, to reinforce the point I am trying to make, to make it look like the author I am citing is unambiguously agreeing with me, etc. I also use it when handling the Bible. I tend to focus on the parts that make sense of how I understand God, how I see the life of discipleship, what I want people to understand about the story of God's interaction with the world he has made. It's just easier if we omit the troublesome and confusing parts, isn't it?

The same is true for the life of faith in general, I think. We adopt an ellipsis approach to faith when we ignore or explain away the nasty parts of life, and focus only on the pleasant and uplifting and inspiring. When we honour the mountain tops and gloss over the dark valleys. When we admire and valorize only the victorious and triumphant experiences of faith and explain away periods of doubt and fear and wrestling with God (or, worse, describe these things as evidence of a *lack* of genuine faith). Like the Psalms, like *all* of Scripture, the life of faith is not a wonderfully seamless narrative that maps precisely on to our conceptions of what it ought to look like. Some things don't seem to fit. Some things are best left out of the story. Or so we think.

The Greek word "ellipsis" (ἔλλειψις) means "omission," which is probably the meaning we are most familiar with. But it can also connote something like "falling short" or "unfinished." Perhaps when we leave things out—whether in our handling of Scripture or in our understanding and articulation of faith—we are, in important ways, *falling short*. We are not telling the whole story. We are failing to represent the full picture that we see both in the story of Scripture and in human experience—a picture that, while often characterized by moments of deep joy, is also, at times, complex, painful, and messy. We are failing to live honestly before God and others.

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Three little dots. What are we omitting? Why? What are we leaving unfinished in our telling and living the story of faith?

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