

Dealing with Real Life: Disappointment and Loss Ps. 137:1-4;

Hebr. 11:35b-39; Ps. 73:16-20

A few years ago, an older couple in our church left our area to move closer to their family, due to the wife's serious illness. She died a year or two later. I contacted the husband several times during the following year. In one conversation, I asked him if he had been able to find a church home in his new location. "Well," he said, "there is a service each week here where I live, but I haven't been going. I'm finding it hard to believe in God following the death of my wife." I told him we would continue to pray for him, but I was troubled by the conversation. I wanted him to have the support that a church can provide. But I also wondered if I was somehow giving people the impression that God will spare Christians from the normal losses and disappointments of life. I thought maybe I ought to address this issue directly.

Many of you have suffered great losses and disappointments- deaths of people you really love, serious illness, divorce, the loss of a job, miscarriages, mental illness (your own, or that of a loved one), infertility, the loss of a life dream, addictions, or watching bullies and cheaters win all the time. All of these can lead to great pain, and often to the loss of a sense of security in our lives, leaving us feeling unsettled and at sea. This isn't how we imagined our lives would be! And these losses may also cause us to

question our faith, especially if we expected God to protect us from such things.

Some Christian preachers, like Joel Osteen, proclaim the so-called “Prosperity Gospel,” which teaches that that God will only give followers of Jesus good things in life- that they will be spared from normal ills and trials, or that they will be miraculously delivered from them- and that they will always prosper materially as well. Other churches, while not preaching this “prosperity gospel,” still teach and sing about a life in Christ that is always happy and joyful. But is that what the Bible teaches?

Consider these words from Ps. 137. In 586 B.C., the nation of Israel was attacked and overwhelmed by the Babylonian army. The entire city of Jerusalem and the temple, believed by the Israelites to be protected by God, was leveled and burnt to the ground. The brightest and best of the population were carried off into exile in Babylon, where the Psalmist writes,

¹By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

²On the willows there we hung up our harps.

³For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

⁴*How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? (Ps. 137:1-4)*

Can you hear the pathos in these words? The bottom has dropped out for these musicians, as they mourn those who died, and as they resist adjusting to this new culture and land. On top of that, their faith has been rocked as they discovered that God wouldn't or couldn't protect them! For a nation that believed they were God's chosen people, it doesn't get much worse than that!

And they are not alone among biblical characters who suffered.

Listen to these words about the saints of old from the book of Hebrews. *...others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection.* ³⁶*Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.* ³⁷*They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—* ³⁸*of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.* ³⁹*Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, (Hebr. 11:35b-39)*

God's people clearly were not protected from the normal tragedies of life; in fact, they were often subject to greater trials because of their commitment to follow the ways of the Lord. Clearly, the Bible does not

teach us that God will spare us from losses and disappointments in life. The question is, how we will respond to them.

As a pastor, I've seen such losses drive people away from God, like the gentleman I mentioned earlier. On the other hand, I've also seen such losses drive people to a greater reliance on God. Though the processes which lead to one outcome or the other are complicated and somewhat mysterious, I think there are things we can do to increase the chances that our losses will lead us toward God, rather than away from him. Here are three things we can do.

First, don't deny or minimize the reality of your loss. When I was a youth director, the father of two kids in my youth group died suddenly of a heart attack. One of the church pastors asked me to come with him to visit the young widow and her middle school and high school aged children. He read the 23rd Psalm, and then shared what I regarded as a profound insight. He quoted the fourth verse, "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me...*" (Ps. 23:4-KJV) Then he said, "The only way to get through this tragedy is to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. You'll be tempted to go around it, because it's so painful. But that doesn't work. You have to walk through it. You can do that by talking with each other about your dad and about

how you're doing. And do so knowing that God is walking with you through this valley."

One of the problems for those who believe the "Happy-talk" versions of Christian faith, is that it is very difficult for them to admit the depth of the losses that they have experienced. Real, committed Christians should be able to waltz right around them, right? But it doesn't work that way. God made us as mortal creatures, and mortal creatures must grieve their losses and disappointments. And when they refuse to do so, bad things happen to their souls and their relationships. So, don't minimize your loss.

Second, rely on your community of faith. Paul tells us, ²*Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:2)* That might happen in a Sunday School class or a women's circle or a small group. It might happen in a grief support group, or with a Stephen Minister or a deacon. It might happen in conversations with individual fellow Christians who will listen to you and pray with you. God has not designed you to bear your loss alone! You are part of what Paul calls "the Body of Christ." If one part of that body hurts, the other parts come to its aid. Rely on your community of faith. And if you get stuck in your grieving- stuck with anger or deep sadness or depression, for example- don't hesitate to seek the help of a caring professional.

By the way, if you want to help and support others in their losses, focus on listening. Ask open-ended questions. Offer to pray with the person. If a death is involved, talk about the person who has died, sharing your own memories and giving the grieving person the opportunity to share theirs. There's no need to preach.

Finally, if you've suffered a loss, make use of spiritual resources. I want to tread lightly here. As C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, A Grief Observed after his wife died, "Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand."

In the 73rd Psalm, the Psalmist is angry with God. He has always believed that those who follow God by living lives of integrity will be blessed. But as he looks around him, he sees evil people living high on the hog, while God's people are just scraping by, like he is. He is incensed by this injustice. He goes on with his complaint for 12 verses! Then, in verse 16 he tells us how he came to some resolution on the issue. ¹⁶*But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task,*

¹⁷*until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.* (Ps. 73:16,17)

The Psalmist admits that he is unable to work out the whys and wherefores of his crisis of faith on his own; he said it was a “wearisome task.” But when he goes into the sanctuary of God, he gets some help.

I think that’s a good insight. When you experience a loss or disappointment, keep up those spiritual practices of prayer, scripture reading, worship, and fellowship. You may need to do them in different ways, but keep doing them. Even if you’re angry with God, keep doing them. Use them to tell God how you’re feeling about him. That’s what the Psalmist did. And so did the prophets. And so did Jesus, when he cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It’s OK to tell God how you’re feeling, and ask for his help.

And God will walk with you through your valleys. You may not sense it at the time. And it may take a long time to renew your relationship with God. But it’s more likely to happen if you continue those spiritual practices by which we usually connect with God. Prayer. Scripture. Worship. Fellowship. Make them habits now; keep them as habits when you’re struggling later.

Remember, God’s people are not promised that they will be spared the ordinary disappointments and losses of life. But they are promised that God will walk with them through each loss.