

Grief and loss in the life of the disciple

We usually associate a sense of grief with losing a loved one. This can be sadness for what was, but also grieving for what could have been. Often this is linked with a loss of our individual expectations in terms of our own lives and the lives of others. But seeing grief in terms of the loss of expectations brings in a whole range of situations which go beyond the death of a loved one.

A sense of loss can come from many causes. Loss of opportunity in terms of; education, redundancy, lack of friends, life partner, children, grandchildren, loneliness or lack of the material things which we expected to have, to name but some.

Loss of expectation can also have an impact even when we appear to have these things; the parents or partner who are unsupportive and uncaring, the children who fail to meet our expectations, the ecclesia which fails to provide the care and fellowship we expect. The job where we are unappreciated or trapped, the changing circumstances brought about by ill health, physical disabilities and old age. Having to give up our independence when we can no longer drive or are forced to make the decision to leave our own home. Each of these and many other situations can lead to grieving, anxiety and mental suffering

The impact of loss can be seen in sadness or depression, a sense of powerlessness where we become turned in upon ourselves and are consumed with grief and are caught up in feelings of hopelessness, anxiety about the future and worthlessness about ourselves. We can feel that our life doesn't matter, a feeling which can be exacerbated when we see others whose lives appear to exhibit that which we find lacking in our own.

Yet loss is an integral part of life, the passage of time inevitably leads to changes in ourselves and our life circumstances. At some stage each of us will be faced with the reality of loss and the emotional strains which this brings upon us. We cannot avoid loss, but we can observe our reaction to loss and be aware of the debilitating effect it can have upon us.

We often grow up with a clear picture in mind of how life will be both for ourselves and for others and when life does not meet these expectations then a very real sense of loss, even failure can arise in our minds. The past decisions which we have made or not made can come to haunt us when life does not follow the path which we expected.

For the follower of Christ there is often an expectation that if we try to do the right thing then we will experience God's blessings, a thought which is sometimes supported by a superficial reading of scripture

"See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: ²⁷ the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, ²⁸ and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.

Deuteronomy 11:26

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However, holding onto these expectations in the face of adversity will only lead to ongoing anxiety and mental suffering. The Apostle Paul was no stranger to suffering himself and offered the following advice to his prodigy Timothy;

But godliness with contentment is great gain.⁷ For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.⁸ And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.

1 Timothy 6:6

Holding onto the sense of loss, carrying bitterness towards others and failing to forgive ourselves our apparent failings, will continue to fuel our suffering and anxiety. Paul speaks of this elsewhere and tells us;

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:11

Being content does not mean ignoring our circumstances but it does mean looking beyond them and focusing upon what we have rather than what is lacking. Happiness is not guaranteed in life, but joy comes from feeling the love of God in our hearts, acceptance of the way things are, and seeking to make changes to our expectations as life changes.

These feelings of grief or loss are common to many and will persist if we continue to hold onto our view of how things should be. It is a harsh reality that much of our suffering is mental suffering caused by our expectations of the sort of life we should have. In this situation if we continue to resist the way things are then we will continue to suffer.

There are many situations in life where we have no control over our circumstances. Bereavement, illness, or concern about the lives of others are some examples where we can do little to change things and we need to place our concerns into the hand of God. Hard though this may be, acceptance of the position, placing our trust in the love of God is the starting point for recovery even when there seems no way forward. Acceptance is not weakness or acquiescence but is a powerful tool in our spiritual armoury.

And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.³⁶ And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.

Mark 14 :35

Instead of giving ourselves over to powerlessness, suffering and anxiety we can accept the circumstances we find ourselves in, trust in the mercy of God, forgiving ourselves and others. By doing these things we can begin to take joy in the small things of life. Acceptance of our

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circumstances removes the resistance to them which is the cause of mental suffering and we may be surprised to find that acceptance means that other options may become available to us which will allow us to claw a way out of our mental state and find fulfilment in other alternatives. Trusting in God, gratitude in the small things we have rather than a focus on lack, happiness in what we can do for others, looking outside of ourselves, these are the means by which joy can come back into our lives.

Many find themselves facing situations they do not want and did not expect and over which they have no control. Yet life has been given to us by God not to live perfectly or as we would expect but to live faithfully in whatever our circumstances.

*Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.
9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made
perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my
weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

2 Corinthians 12:8

Of course, it goes without saying that the love of God is usually manifested in the acts of kindness carried out by those who are moved by the needs of others.

Whilst adversity can bring bitterness, grief and a sense of loss, acceptance of our circumstances, trust in God and joy in that we can rejoice in, can open the way to new possibilities and a deeper and more meaningful faith, borne out of God's strength rather than our own.

*For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults,
hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am
strong.*

2 Corinthians 12:10

Quotes from English Standard Version (ESV)

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