

DISAPPOINTMENT AND DISCIPLESHIP

THE INEVITABILITY OF DISAPPOINTMENT

Well here's a cheerful devotional thought to brighten your day and inspire your faith: Disappointment is inevitable in following Jesus. There, I've come right out and said it. And even now a little thought may be nagging away; am I losing it, am I depressed, do I not have faith, have I spent too long reading Jeremiah?

A message of disappointment doesn't play very comfortably on our evangelical ears except in those corners of the church which have adopted a siege mentality against the culture. But it's a very clear theme in the Bible, a minor chord we've subconsciously tuned out or sought to hide in the Old Testament, and if we ignore it then it comes back to bite us with some ferocity.

Once you start looking, it's all over the place. All the main stories in the story of Israel end in glorious failure. Take the patriarchs. Abraham receives a promise of a huge family and a new life in a new world. He ends up living in tents with two sons, one of whom causes him nothing but trouble. By the fourth generation his descendants are taking refuge from famine in Egypt.

Take the Exodus. God spectacularly delivers the Israelites from Pharaoh. Next thing we read in the account is them making a golden calf and coming under judgement. Of the million who left Egypt only two make it to the promised land and neither of those is their leader Moses, the friend of God, who dies just before the people cross the Jordan.

Take the Kingdom. After an epic struggle the Kingdom is finally established under God's chosen man, David. Just as everything comes together he commits murder and adultery. The whole monarchy is under judgement culminating in the exile. Take the ending of the exile. God's people return from Babylon after seventy years but it's a long drawn out struggle, there's no record of God's glory returning to the temple and the people find themselves under pagan rule in the land.

And if we were hoping that the disappointment theme would come to an end at the close of the Old Testament the New Testament quickly relieves us of that notion. The Messiah who was to fulfil the hopes of Israel and deliver them from Pagan rule ends up being crucified. Two devastated disciples wandering hopelessly away from Jerusalem give voice to that age old cry of disappointment "we had hoped..."

And so it continues. The apostle Paul pours himself out in a great church planting movement but by the end of his life he's in prison awaiting execution, his friends have deserted him and many of the churches he's planted are getting in big trouble. Very few of the cities where Paul planted churches have thriving communities of disciples today.

So when we encounter disappointment in following Jesus it shouldn't surprise us. Disappointment is not necessarily a sign of failure in our discipleship, although if we've been flirting with sin it could be, disappointment is an inevitable part of the journey. If we hide from disappointment or cover it up we perpetuate the myth that God is committed to our success on our terms. Those terms could easily destroy us.



THE ROOT OF DISAPPOINTMENT

So why is disappointment seemingly unavoidable, how is it that we're so often set up for disappointment by our expectations? I guess it has to come back to being a wonderful, broken person in God's wonderful, broken world.

You can see the wonder every day: A stunning sunset, the smile of a friend, a new baby, the joy of doing something really well. You can see the brokenness everyday: Someone we love lets us down, a friend is diagnosed with cancer, we don't get the decision we wanted, the gnawing hopelessness when we wonder how the future will work out. The wonder and the pain are not blended together but stark opposites running side by side through every day of our lives. We instinctively know that the world has the potential to be amazing beyond all telling but we also know that it can be unpitifully cruel. Many today turn down the contrast and live in a dull, semi-depressed state, terrified of hope for fear of being set up in order to be let down.

God's design for life is that we live in intimate, moment by moment fellowship with him that is satisfying and delightful to the soul. This place of security and love and joy and freedom and wonder is to be the wellspring from which our life flows. The details of our life are then an expression of God and the wonder of who he is.

The great tragedy of human rebellion is that the order is reversed. Having rejected God, we look for God substitutes, idols, which then become gods over us. Those idols may in themselves be good things, part of God's wonderful world, but since they've been elevated out of all proportion, they do us great harm. They powerfully shape our hopes, our character and our lives. But as they are created things, not the creator himself, they cannot possibly live up to our expectations. They can only deceive and disappoint us.

When we come to Jesus and begin to recognise the wonder of God and the stupid futility and self-destructiveness of our sin, this profoundly changes us. We give our allegiance to him, begin a new life and set off on a radically different course. But our sin and its consequences in our internal lives run much deeper than we imagine.

The church fathers said that God had hidden from us the wonder of our humanity lest we be ruined by our vanity. We are far more profound than we realise and so is our brokenness. We may have truly chosen to follow Jesus but the draw of our old idols, like a hidden current in a seemingly placid river, run deeper than we know. We claim that God will satisfy us but below the surface we have a secret idea about how God will satisfy us.

Before Jesus broke into my life I looked to my career to bring me respect and security and creative possibilities. In the light of Jesus that looked ridiculous. But my former idol was not going to let go that easily. I thought my problem was putting too much emphasis on career but my deeper idol was success. I immediately set out to become a successful Christian, which in my context meant getting good at evangelism.

The true source of all happiness and love and joy and creativity and freedom and hope is God himself. But our perspective and expectations and habits of mind and body are so twisted that our hope gets attached to God and other things. And the degree to which those God-rivals rule us is the limit of our freedom and potential. Here the relentless love and kindness and graciousness of God is at its most fierce. God will not surrender us to rivals that would destroy us. He will go after those idols hiding in the depths of our heart until we are truly and fully delivered into the only life that is truly life.

God loves us too much to leave us caught in two worlds. He will not leave us in between his life and the death that is idolatry, and he will not give us supernatural idol-bypass surgery. Our idols must be unmasked and ruthlessly dealt with before they can find their proper place in God's world. And it's the unmasking of those idols and the breaking of their power in our hearts that guarantees that we'll taste the bitterness of disappointment.





DISAPPOINTMENT AS THE MOMENT OF DECISION

In John 6 Jesus' ministry looks like a runaway train. He takes a retreat with his disciples and thousands follow him into the wilderness. For the disciples this must have looked encouraging if somewhat overwhelming. It gets better, Jesus performs a mighty miracle and feeds five thousand from one packed lunch. Impressive, and if you were well versed in the Old Testament you may have noted resonances from the Exodus. Surely Jesus the Messiah, like Moses, would lead the people through the wilderness of occupation to the Promised Land of the restoration of the house of David.

Jesus sees things rather differently. He sees beyond the apparent spiritual hunger of the crowds to the heart of things and he tells it as he sees it: "...you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." Encouragingly the crowd respond by asking some good questions but Jesus again sees beneath the surface. To show their failure to embrace spiritual truth he gives them a teaching that is difficult to take literally: "I am the bread of life... I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you..." And finally hearts are exposed: "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

Suddenly what had looked so encouraging turns on its head. Many leave disappointed. The twelve thought they were witnessing a moment of great hope, in reality they were observing a sad revelation of the human potential for shallowness; The multitudes turned out to be much more committed to their stomachs than to Christ.

Jesus turns to his disciples and what follows is incredibly moving to me: So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Here's the crunch point we all must face, the ground zero of disappointment and, for that matter, of discipleship. In our disappointment, when our idols fail us, do we turn to Jesus in trust or turn away from him in resentment for not doing what we'd expected? When our idols are stripped away, do we still want God? Is God himself what we really want? Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

There was a similar crunch point in the Exodus. As 1 Corinthians 10 reminds us: "...[The Israelites] were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

They followed God out of Egypt and through the wilderness but the further they got the clearer it became that God and God alone was not what they wanted. It all came to a head in Numbers 14: "So [the Israelites] said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt..." the whole congregation threatened to stone [Moses]..." There you have it. Given the clear choice between God and Pharaoh, they chose Pharaoh, and tragically they had looked so much like blood-shielded, baptized, spiritually-fed disciples.

When we put our hope in anything beyond Jesus, as we all do, we will experience disappointment. If our following Jesus was actually to secure some end other than him, which to some degree it always is, then that disappointment can be devastating and result in resentment and deeper rebellion. However, if we'll allow our disappointment to turn us to him then it can be the door to a new day of freedom and intimacy with him. The question is not whether we'll face disappointment, disappointment is inevitable. The question is how we respond to disappointment. Will we allow it to turn us to Jesus or away from him? Disappointment creates a moment of re-evaluation. That moment is one of the deepest tests, greatest opportunities and most critical points in our walk with him.





DISAPPOINTMENT AS THE THRESHOLD OF RESURRECTION

Disappointment forces us to surrender a hope. The critical question is which hope do we surrender? Do we surrender the false hope of our idols and find freedom, or do we surrender our true hope in God alone and find slavery? God will never disappoint us. He will always prove true and loving and faithful and wonderful and satisfying beyond our wildest dreams. God and success in ministry, God and freedom from health problems, God and a particular cherished outcome from a situation will set us up for trouble.

The woman or man whose hope is in God alone is a truly free, truly happy, truly alive person. We all find ourselves drawn by God to this place that has been described as owning nothing and possessing everything.

This is the place where we are free to enjoy all things in their proper place without becoming enslaved to them. This is the place where we know the glorious, life-giving, anxiety-free life where we trust God with outcomes and where what we truly want and what he truly wants flow together. This is the place where our heart and life and purpose flow together with God's and our life fully expresses his life. This is oneness with him. This is life as it was meant to be. God loves us so much that he's not content with anything less and disappointment is necessary if painful surgery to cut out the cancer of idolatry from deep within our hearts.

But our enemy is subtle. Very often he'll help us bind the hope we place in our idols to our perception of the character of God. This is the archetypal story of the serpent in Eden, the devil seeking to undermine our perception of the character of God and his motives. My desire for success in evangelism is a good thing. The trouble is that my security and identity have become entangled with my success making me insecure and manipulative.

As God sets us free from those things we're enslaved to we can be tempted to resent him for it. The Israelites memorably complained in the wilderness "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic..." It would be laughable if it wasn't our story as well: "We were being brutally enslaved and murdered by Pharaoh, but we had free cucumbers!"

The plumb-line which will expose every lie that the serpent whispers to us is this: When we're tempted to think the best of God we're always right. When we're tempted to think less than the best of God we're always being deceived. This is a very powerful test which is unfailingly accurate. But our pride and our persistent notion that we know better than God can sometime coax us across lines that do real damage and sometimes cannot be re-crossed. The goodness of God is not something we need to pass an exam, it must become the foundation to our whole life. This isn't learned in a textbook, it's learned in life.

The school of disappointment is not one that can be avoided. Lowering our expectations and attempting little is not a strategy for avoiding disappointment, it's simply another idolatrous strategy for life from which we must be delivered.

The challenge of disappointment is to keep a tender and teachable heart. It's as we learn to recognise the heart of God, so graphically displayed in the parable of the prodigal son, and interpret our circumstances in light of God's goodness, power and faithfulness that we find freedom. It's as we interpret the heart of God through the lens of our circumstances that we find slavery. It's as we nurture lies about God's character that idols become attractive, it's as we choose to believe truths about God's heart that we find hope.

Ultimately, our disappointments will be resolved and our hopes fully realised in the new creation when "[God] will dwell with [us]; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away". Until then we must be prepared to walk through death trusting only in God's promises, as Jesus did.

