

Finding God in Our Disappointments Sunday, 12/6/20

Wow, does this ever look familiar! When I experience disappointment, one of the ways I tend to express it is by burying my head in my hands and slumping down towards the ground. All too often, that seems to happen while I'm sitting in front of my computer, whether that's because I've just lost an hour of work that wasn't saved, or because I've just read an email or a Facebook posting that's upended my expectations in some way. How about you? Do you scream, cry, get quiet, or sigh when you face disappointments? Do you get depressed and find it difficult to take action, or are you catapulted into fight-or-flight mode, letting adrenaline carry you through the moments until you finally collapse in exhaustion?

Sometimes our disappointments are small, and we manage to shake them off pretty easily and make the necessary adjustments to our lives: Someone important forgets our birthday, the plans we had for a special night out get cancelled. But some disappointments are more long-lasting and life-altering: A loved one dies, we become physically or psychologically disabled, a marriage ends. Those kinds of disappointments aren't as easy to shake off or turn over to God, and we often find ourselves saying the same thing as the women in the earlier story: "I never expected life to hurt so much."¹ The pain of our disappointments can make us wonder where God is, why God would allow us to experience that kind of pain, and even if God really is "good" after all.

Lets consider for a moment where disappointments come from. Although they can feel like a string of bad luck or like unfair or cruel treatment from others, the truth is subtly different. Disappointment is what we feel when our expectations turn out to be different than reality. It's a basic exercise in simple division. The bigger our expectations, and the smaller the corresponding reality is, the bigger our disappointment turns out to be. There are at least two implications from that for our lives.

First, note that disappointment is internally generated, not something that happens to you at all. If you stop and think about that, it's rather remarkable. It means that no person or

¹ Stan Purdum. *Travel the Highways of Advent*, p. 27. Abingdon (2014).

circumstance can directly cause you disappointment. Since you're in control of your expectations, you always have at least some control over your disappointments.

Next, note that reality is notoriously difficult to determine. It can be quickly changing and highly subjective. Witness the variety of perceptions regarding the current pandemic and how they've changed in only a matter of months. What's more, our own distorted views of reality can cause what I'd call a disappointment feedback loop, where each disappointment we experience introduces a bias to our perception of reality, leading us to perceive more of a difference between expectations and reality than there actually is. We've all experienced that when we've "gotten up on the wrong side of the bed" and experienced one miserable moment after another. If we really want to experience fewer disappointments in life, we need to be watching for those kinds of biases that skew our perception of reality.

Wouldn't life be simpler if we just had no expectations in the first place? But that's not how God created us to be.

In our reading from Proverbs, we heard that "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a dream fulfilled is a tree of life."² We're all too familiar with the sick heart in the first half of this proverb, but look again at the second part. The Tree of Life occurs in various parts of the Bible as a pointer to God's promise to us of eternal life. But there's wisdom here beyond that ultimate promise. I believe we were created to hope, which is, after all, the basis of faith, the hope in things unseen. That hope includes the resurrection and eternal life, but it also includes things in the present life, like fellowship with God, fulfilling human relationships, and the fruit of the Holy Spirit. So, if we're wired by God to have hope, what's the difference between hope and expectations?

I like to think of the difference as being the origin of the ideas. Expectations come from within us or the societies we live in. Some expectations come from our parents, some come from the specific communities we live in, and some expectations that we're carrying around seem to come from the unique alchemy of who we are as individuals. Expectations are formed by people, so they're especially susceptible to failure when compared with reality.

² Proverbs 13:12. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

Hope, on the other hand, comes from God, and when we put our hope in the things of God, like the fruit of the Holy Spirit, instead of human things and other people, we're not likely to be disappointed, because the reality of God is so much bigger than what we can see or understand in this life. That's part of what Solomon was getting at when he wrote, "[God] has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end."³ When we trade our human expectations of this life for Godly hope, we not only find more worthwhile things to hope for, but we find that the reality that's limited by our human senses can be traded for God's supernatural reality that's unlimited by our faith.

Let's take what we've learned this morning and see how it checks out against the experience of Joseph, as we continue our journey through the Advent story in the Gospel of Matthew. I'm reading verses 18-21 in the first chapter in The Message.

{Read Matthew 1:18-21, MSG}

Let's put ourselves in Joseph's shoes for a minute and try to apply our expectations formula from earlier. Joseph had clear expectations of Mary as his betrothed that she would remain chaste prior to the consummation of their marriage. That expectation has always varied from culture to culture, but at this time and in this place it was a clearly defined expectation in Jewish society. In fact, so strong was that expectation that Mary might even have been publicly stoned if she had been prosecuted as being unfaithful to Joseph. So, we know the expectations numerator in the equation was high for Joseph- how about the denominator? There was simply zero precedent in the 1st Century Palestinian worldview for divine pregnancy. Even today, with all that's been revealed to us through the Holy Scriptures, there are plenty of Christians who can't expand their view of reality to accept the supernatural power of God in this and many other matters. Consequently, Joseph's reality denominator was small. Do the math and you'll see that the result must have been a massive disappointment for Joseph, born out of high expectations and a very limited view of reality.

But God didn't leave Joseph in his disappointment in Mary. Instead, God did for Joseph what God can do for you as well. God spoke to Joseph and with a great economy of

³ Ecclesiastes 3:11b. Ibid.

words- only four sentences- he reversed Joseph's disappointment by replacing his expectations with hope and his limited view of reality with a supernatural one. Joseph's expectation of Mary's chastity was traded for a dream of a savior for all people. Can you see how powerful it can be when we look beyond our small expectations and dare to hope in God visions? Joseph's view of reality became limitless when he was invited to trade what he could only see with his eyes for what is possible by the infinite power and love of God. Instead of heading down the path of a disappointment feedback loop, Joseph entered into an exhilarating journey of hope and discovery through God's power into a future that was so much more than he could ever have built for himself.

What are the disappointments that are holding you back today? There are a great many circumstances in life that we simply can't change, and just as many people. What you can change, however, are your expectations and your view of reality. I'm not saying that's easy, but I am saying that, by God's grace, it's possible. You don't have to hold onto rigid expectations for your future and those around you. That's just a setup for disappointment. You don't have to limit your world to what you think you see with your eyes. You're bound to be mistaken, especially if you're not using the eyes of God instead. Replace your expectations with the hope we find in Jesus and your view of reality with the perspective of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is the better way that you're looking for, and when you trust your heart to Jesus, you'll never be disappointed.

Please take some time now to reflect on the good and surprising future God has in store for you. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.



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