

DEALING
with
DISAPPOINTMENT

JOHN HINDLEY

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COMPANY

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1. WE ARE DISAPPOINTED

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king of
Jerusalem:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!”

says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 1 v 1-2)

I find this the most disturbing, the most intriguing and one of
the most attractive beginnings to any book of the Bible.

DISTURBING

It disturbs me because it seems at odds with much of what
I think the Christian faith is—or at least should be—about.
When I think of following Christ, I picture Paul preaching in
a marketplace as the crowd grows more angry and some grow
more interested. I picture Moses walking through the wind-
held seas as the Lord himself stands behind as rearguard for
his ransomed people. I picture Abraham sacrificing a ram
instead of his son on Mount Moriah, I picture missionaries

watching the shore of their homeland slipping over the horizon, knowing they will never see it again.

When I think about following Christ, I think of a life of faith, love, hope and courage. I enjoy the truths that we can find our identity in Christ, that he gives us a commandment to love and a commission to share the good news that saved us. I often picture Russell Crowe's *Gladiator* inspiring his men by telling them that their deeds will echo in eternity. I love its half-truth: that there are deeds which echo in eternity but that they are those done in the quiet, for the least of people. I love that the smile and welcome for the refugee, the meal popped round to the sick friend and the sleep-stealing, desperate prayer that no one hears apart from the Lord of Hosts are that echo to eternity.

The Christian life is a life full of meaning, isn't it? So it is disturbing to read a Bible book that begins with a declaration of the meaninglessness of life. It is even more disturbing that these words come from the lips of the Teacher, son of David, king of God's people—from Solomon, the greatest and wisest of the kings of Israel. And it is still more disturbing to realise that these are inspired words—words inspired by the author of the Bible, David's still greater descendant, the Lord Jesus, through his Spirit. These words are just Solomon's insight, but Jesus Christ's. It is deeply disturbing to read the One who is the source of all meaning declare that life can be meaningless.

And it is even more disturbing because it is so obviously true.

INTRIGUING

This is what intrigues me about the book of Ecclesiastes, and especially the way it begins. After his arresting start, Solomon goes on to write a tragic lament on the meaninglessness of life:

What do people gain from all their labours
at which they toil under the sun?
Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains for ever.
The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.
All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.
What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which one can say,
“Look! This is something new”?
It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.
No one remembers the former generations,
and even those yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow them. (Ecclesiastes 1 v 3-11)

It rings so true to our day-to-day life. So much of life feels like toil. You get up scarcely believing that the alarm could possibly have the time right. The morning routine of toast,

toothbrushes, lost book-bags, late buses, strong coffee (drunk cold) and screaming children, or maybe just of crushing loneliness, leaves you getting to work just on time feeling as if you've already put in a tough day. (If your morning routine consists of pootling around the house in dressing gown and slippers as your sausages sizzle in the pan and you wonder what to do on such a delightful day, then first, don't tell other people, it won't be appreciated; and second, you will come to see why this book is still for you).

After the morning of toil, there is a day of hard graft on the building site, or in the office, school, factory, home or hospital. Or worse, there is the drawn-out process of trying to fill a day that you wish contained work, but does not. The day's work might be followed by bathtimes, bedtimes, homework or emails, cooking, cleaning, bills and decisions, meetings for church, school governors, family crises or a local-issue group—or even more empty hours to fill. Sure, there is some time for relaxing with friends, family, book or screen. But the simple question, “What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun?” is intriguing. We readily accept the idea that life feels like labour and toil. We also readily acknowledge the fear that it might indeed be meaningless.

When it is Christ who declares that all things can be meaningless, then we need to sit up and listen. This is not what I expect to hear him say.

ATTRACTIVE

Yet knowing that Jesus authored to statement that life can be meaningless—that it is no surprise to him that we are disappointed—is attractive to me. It is attractive and brings great relief. The fear that most, or all, of what we do might

be meaningless is one of the hidden terrors of the Christian heart. We do not voice it often, and we hide from it even in ourselves. Most of us feel it, though. Since deciding to write this book, and talking about it with family and friends, I have been genuinely surprised by how many have said that disappointment is a serious issue for them in their Christian life—and, it seems, it is even more of an issue for my family and friends who do not follow Jesus. So I love how the real God addresses this reality. A nagging disappointment or a quiet desperation about how life has turned out might be something of a taboo subject in churches, but God sees fit to speak out on this.

The sense of meaninglessness—indeed, the reality of meaninglessness—that the Teacher of Ecclesiastes articulates is the gnawing disappointment in our souls. This disappointment is something that we feel, sometimes in a way we are only vaguely aware of, like a crocodile silently drifting below the surface, only showing nostrils and yellow eyes. Of course, like the crocodile, sometimes disappointment rears its head and sinks its teeth into us. Disappointment is a form of suffering—one of the trials of living in this broken and breaking age. It is the ongoing consequences of major suffering in our lives. For example, if your child is seriously ill or your marriage is breaking down, you will rightly feel as though you are going through a period of dark and hard suffering. Two years after the death of your child or the ending of your marriage, you will still feel the pain of it. You may also carry a burden of disappointment over what might have been, over what you have lost. There is no need to try to tease out what is suffering and what is disappointment—life is just not that simple, as you well know. But part of the pain is the sense of “what if...” and the aimlessness and emptiness of life now.

Often, disappointment is our response to the lack of something. It's why we don't tend to think of it as suffering, because we generally use that word to describe an active pain—illness, bereavement, or betrayal. But lacking something—spouse, children, friends, fulfilment—is something we all know, and it hurts. It is disappointment.

And then there is a disappointment that appears to have no root. There is nothing that we would call suffering, but also nothing lives up to what we hoped. This sense of general disappointment is what I see all around me in friends of my age—going on forty—although it is by no means limited to them. This is the sense that there is nothing obviously wrong—I have a decent job, a nice house, a good wife, healthy, growing children, and yet...

... And yet life feels empty, meaningless. In twenty years' time I will be in more or less the same job, same house, and same marriage with the same kids coming home for Christmas, (hopefully). There is nothing else to hope for beyond the Friday-night takeaway, the break over Christmas and the holiday we're planning for next summer. There are plenty of good times in life, and nothing I could really complain about. But surely there is more than this?

The strange thing about this kind of rootless disappointment is that it gets worse as you achieve your dreams. It lives at the top of the mountain that you set yourself to climb when you were young. On reaching the summit, you enjoyed the view for a while—and then you saw that there was nothing there. It was bare rock.

We don't even want to go near this sense of disappointment. We see it in the triumphant athlete who turns to drink after they retire, the multi-millionaire who is still a workaholic despite having all he could want, or the friend who retires on

a good pension and goes on long-dreamed-of cruises, who sees their family regularly, and yet who finds that infirmity, illness or just the looming reality of death discolours all those perfect pictures. These figures intrigue and scare us because we want to hope that there could be more—that a lucky deal, a well-planned holiday, a child who plays professional football or who wins a Grand Slam will bring the meaning we crave. To know that the great and good struggle to find meaning is frightening.

FINDING JOY

If you have lived, you've been disappointed. And if you've been disappointed, you've experienced the way it deadens joy and steals satisfaction. I'm guessing there are areas of quiet desperation in your life that you prefer to push to the back of your mind and try to leave there—but they keep pushing back.

What do you do with disappointment? What difference does, or can, Jesus Christ make to that disappointment? How can you be realistic about disappointments, and yet walk through life with a joy that actually grows in those disappointments?

That's what I set out to write a book about. This is it. And it's held some surprises for me. But it's definitely helped me. Jesus says life is meaningless—but that's not all he says. I don't think you'll find it easy to read this book. But I hope you'll find it liberating as it brings you face to face with the God who “in all things ... works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8 v 28).