

Navigating Disappointment



by STEVE MIDGLEY

This past year has been unusually marked by disappointment. The global COVID-19 pandemic has been hard on nearly everyone in one way or another. Gap years have been canceled, weddings postponed, summer holidays abandoned. Churches, workplaces, and schools have gone virtual. Face-to-face contact has been lost and relationships have been put on hold. Disappointment is all around us. We are disappointed that we cannot visit family. Disappointed that we cannot socialize with friends. Disappointed when lockdowns go on and on with no clear end in sight.

Many of our disappointments are like that. They are the kind of frustrations that stop us from enjoying day-to-day life. But other disappointments are more pervasive and reach far more deeply into our lives. It might be the disappointment we feel about our work or career, or a disappointment with our appearance, or our family. Some disappointments touch at the very heart of our being—like those relating to our marriage or our parents or our church. We might be disappointed that marriage never came or that children never arrived. Disappointed that a sickness never seems to go away. Disappointed, perhaps, even with God himself. These kinds of disappointments can be so life-dominating, so inescapable, that they affect every aspect of the way we live.

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In such circumstances, platitudes like “Cheer up, it could be worse” or “tomorrow’s another day,” are nowhere near adequate. They may suffice for flat tires or missed appointments, but not for a marital affair or a disabled child. What do God and Scripture say about these deeper and most personal disappointments? To answer, we will begin by considering the roots of disappointment, how it takes shape in our lives, and some of the unhelpful ways we respond. Finally, we will consider a biblical path through these more life-altering disappointments with some unexpected help from 1 Corinthians 7.

The Roots of Disappointment

The early chapters of the Bible are a kind of seedbed, a place to look for origins. In some sense, everything that we are now and everything we face finds its roots here. Disappointment is no exception. Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden but then are blessed with the joyful birth of two sons: Cain and Abel. But the story quickly turns dark.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.” (Gen 4:2–12)

Here is a story full of disappointment, as the promise of new life is overtaken by loss. By the end, the lives of both sons are ruined. Not only is Abel’s life lost in a violent death, but it occurs at the hands of his own brother. In punishment for this, Cain’s life is given over to a living death; God condemns him to live as a fugitive. In a matter of moments, both of Adam and Eve’s sons are lost—the very sons on whom so much hope had been placed. The gap between expectation and reality is huge.

Yet the crushing disappointment experienced by Adam and Eve is not the focus of this narrative. What the account highlights is the disappointment experienced by Cain when his offering to God is not accepted. We will explore this disappointment in three stages: 1) healthy desire, 2) toxic need and demand, and 3) terrible damage.

Healthy desire. Cain is hardly an esteemed Bible character. No one has anything positive to say about him. And yet, the very first thing we learn about Cain *is* good. Verse 3 tells us that “in the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD.” Cain chooses to worship. He brings the work of his hands as an offering. It seems reasonable to suppose that Cain brings this sacrifice because, at some level, he wants to be accepted. He has a desire to be pleasing to his God.

In considering the roots of our disappointments, it is important to notice that, mostly, the things we pursue are good. We might want to be married, but we are not. We might want to have children, but every month brings only sadness. We want good exam results, but the grades fall short. We want close friends, but instead, it is another evening alone. We want lockdown to end, social life to return, a new job, a satisfying career—yet in all these healthy desires we may be disappointed.

These are good desires—ones that God approves of. And in wanting them, even in longing for them, we are not chasing something bad.

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The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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