

Easter Sunday

When Faith & Life Collide, Part 2

Brian and Louise Hogan were missionaries to Mongolia. On Christmas day 1994 Brian wrote this letter to all his supporters and prayer partners:

Today is Christmas day. Yesterday our son died. This letter will be tough to write. I usually enjoy writing and the words flow easily. There are no words for this. Yesterday morning Louise woke up to find a perfect baby boy lying dead in his bed. Jedidiah was 52 days old.

I wish you could have known my son. I wish you could have held him and seen how beautiful his hands, eyelashes, lips, everything was. He learned to smile in his last week. Jed used to stare so intently at our faces as if he were memorizing every detail.

I don't understand this "Sudden Infant Death Syndrome." I know that whoever named it never lost a baby to it. The name should reflect that something in the parent suddenly dies.

Yesterday was the longest day of our lives. Louise woke and noticed it was 6:00 AM and Jed hadn't awakened her all night. She knew. Her scream woke me to a nightmare I have yet to awaken from. I ran to where he was sleeping and picked up my only son. Jed was not there.

I prayed for God to raise him from the dead. He didn't.

Louise and I wept in shock and disbelief. The girls woke when Louise had screamed, but had obeyed my command to stay in bed. They were calling to find out what was wrong. I had to go in and hold them and tell them their little brother was dead. I won't even try to describe this.

A coworker and I labored over Jed's body again in anguished prayer. I knew (and know) God could return life to Jed, but I began to realize the answer this time was this body was no longer a vessel for Jedidiah's life.

What do you do when, seemingly out of the blue, life collides with your faith? What do you do when what you thought was going to happen doesn't and instead

something unexpected, even painful, hits you instead? How do we face life's greatest challenges when we don't have all the answers?

That's the topic we took up on Good Friday. We looked at the disciples of Jesus and how confused they became when their expectations weren't met. How disappointed and even fearful they were after the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus.

I. We Set Ourselves Up For Disappointment When We Have Unrealistic Expectations

When Jesus was nearing the end of His work on earth He began speaking to His disciples about the fact that He was going to die, that He was going to leave them. They couldn't understand that. They had left jobs and security to forsake all and follow Him for 3 years. They expected Him to rule as an earthly king and they planned on helping Him do it.

Turn to Matthew 16 Page 866

Read Verses 21-22

"Don't talk about dieing Jesus, you're the King!"

Suddenly all of their hopes collapsed when Jesus was arrested. In fact the Apostle Peter even drew out his sword and cut off a man's ear as he tried to defend Jesus from the men who had come to arrest Him.

Because they couldn't see the whole picture, (think about this) Christ's own disciples wanted to prevent Him from going to the cross. After He died they were so depressed they just gave up. They went into hiding in fear assuming they had followed the wrong man.

If the disciples would have had what they wanted at the time, there would have been no cross, no payment for our sins and no promise of eternal life.

God had a plan. It was a hard plan. But He was working out His purpose.

Their confusion only ended after they saw their Lord risen from the dead. Then everything began to fall into place.

Sometimes we never see the other side while we're on this earth. We can't seem to put the pieces together and discover how it all works.

See, the disciples had unrealistic expectations. They fell into the same trap we do if we're not careful. They still weren't taking the Bible seriously when it spoke of the condition of the world.

Paul Tripp writes, "There is no escaping it. This world isn't functioning as it was designed to function. The Bible warns us that we're living in a world that's literally groaning, waiting for redemption. We live in a world where disease and death exist, neither one of which was part of the initial plan. We live in a world of deceit and disappointment, neither one a part of God's original intention. We live in a world of rebellion and sin, neither a part of the 'good' that God created. We live in a world of violence, surely not the handiwork of the Prince of Peace. We live in a world where lust and greed motivate hearts."

What does that have to do with the disciples? They wanted a kingdom without the cross. They wanted the benefits of God's blessings without the cost.

How about us? We want life to go as if sin never entered our world. We get a diagnosis of cancer and we're shocked by it. Our investment counselor was Bernie Madoff and suddenly we're broke and we're devastated.

Our spouse or our child or our parents are in a car wreck and severely hurt and we're thinking, "Why me?" We're thinking, "Wait a minute. I thought God loved me. This doesn't make sense."

The truth is, it does make sense. We're told over and over again in the Bible about the effects of the fall. We're told that this whole world is groaning and travailing like a woman in labor. So then why are we surprised when we experience troubles?

I'm not saying that understanding makes it easy to go through hardship. But I am saying that understanding allows us to have realistic expectations about life and its problems.

I. We Set Ourselves Up For Disappointment When We Have Unrealistic Expectations

II. When We Don't See This As A Broken World, We Tend To Trust In Ourselves Instead Of God

Turn to John 18 Page 959

At this point Jesus has been arrested and is going through the mockery of a kangaroo court. Witnesses are brought in to tell how He had blasphemed but they contradicted one another.

All the disciples took off when Jesus was arrested except Peter and John.

Read verses 15-16

When John talks about himself in His gospel he's always an unnamed disciple so I believe that this is John who gets Peter in. But notice what happens...

Read verse 17

Back in chapter 13 Peter had said, *I will lay down my life for Your sake.*(John 13:37). In Matthew 26 the Bible says Peter promised, *“Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble. Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!”* (Matthew 26:33&35)

Those were some pretty bold assertions. And I'm sure that Peter was sincere but I also think Peter expected there to be a bold, face-to-face confrontation with some Roman soldier.

Instead, a little servant girl calls him into question and Peter lies. He crumbles.

Read verse 25-27

In Mark it says, *Then he began to curse and swear, “I do not know this Man of whom you speak!”* (Mark 14:71)

When we aren't realistic about the characteristics of this world or even our own sinfulness we think we can handle what ever happens.

Again, Paul Tripp writes, “Unrealistic expectations can cause each of us to live more independently and self-sufficiently than we ever should. In reality, we are all in need

of daily rescuing, forgiving, and empowering grace. We need that grace because none of us is free from the presence and power of sin. That means that moment by moment we need to be rescued from us.”

This is fascinating to me. All of the 4 gospel writers include the account of Peter’s denial. There’s a lot of important material about Jesus that’s omitted by one Gospel or the other because they’re coming at things from different perspectives, but not this section on Peter. If God says something once, it’s important. If it’s repeated 4 times, it’s uber important. God’s hammering home a point.

Try to put yourself in Peter’s place. Jesus has been taken by a multitude with torches and swords. Things look pretty bleak. Peter is sitting right in the middle of enemy territory. The other disciples have taken off. The situation is tense.

I’m sure at this point Peter was scared stiff. He was bracing himself for some kind of formidable confrontation.

Instead, something totally unexpected happens. A little, unpretentious slave girl seems to recognize him. She says out loud, *“This man was also with Him.”*

I believe that Peter was caught totally off guard. He wasn’t prepared for the servant girl so he blurts out, *“Woman, I do not know Him.”*

To me, Peter is a hard to categorize, to pigeon hole. You might say he was fearful at this point, but if that were true why didn’t he just quietly slip out after the first or second time someone questioned him?

On the other hand, he doesn't want to admit any association with Jesus.

But there’s a pattern here that we can all learn from...

Three things:

1) Peter had come into this thing boasting in self confidence. The Bible says: *...let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.* It talks about the frailty of the flesh. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Until we learn what it means to walk close with God in complete dependence on Him, we'll be vulnerable. Especially when the powers of darkness seem to prevail. Peter was vulnerable because of self-confidence.

2) Peter underestimated the power of accusation. He underestimated how much pressure could be applied through the crowd that stood around the fire in the courtyard.

And that happens to the best of us. We think we will stand for Jesus in any circumstance but we underestimate the power that comes when the approval of the crowd is at stake; in the locker-room, in the dorm, in the office, on the job site, when we are with those we admire, when we are on a date. The pressure is powerful . . . we have to prepare a head of time.

3) Peter slipped a little more with each denial.

The first time Peter denied the Lord I believe he felt it really wasn't a denial. He might have said he was being clever. Maybe he would say, he was just trying to avoid trouble. He could rationalize the first denial. But, once the door to compromise and denial had been opened, the second and third denials were a whole lot easier.

That's how sin works. We are tempted to make a small compromise. Once we compromise a little we are tempted to compromise just a little more. Before long we've gone way farther than we ever imagined.

We look at our life and say, "That's not that important. I don't want to get hung up on the small stuff. I'll just let that area of my life go and not worry about it. God knows my heart."

You know what, God does know your heart. That's why he says, *Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life.*

What a piercing sound that rooster must have made. I have to believe that rooster crowing resonated in the depths of Peter's heart.

So here's Peter completely blown away by his own failure. What did he need right then?

He needed to know that God was in control. Even though Jesus was a prisoner, the other disciples had taken off, and Peter had denied his Lord, God was still in control.

Jesus said the rooster would crow and that's exactly what happened the moment Peter denied Jesus for the third time. There's an object lesson there: No matter how dark things looked God was in complete control.

What happens when life and faith collide? What do we need to understand that will see us through? We need to understand that there's no end to the heart aches of this life but that there's nothing that is beyond the power of God.

The lesson of Peter's denial is, if we'd learn this on the front end, we could avoid falling to the pressure and the confusion in the first place.

I. We Set Ourselves Up For Disappointment When We Have Unrealistic Expectations

II. When We Don't See This As A Broken World, We Tend To Trust In Ourselves Instead Of God

III. Our Creator Is Working Out His Sovereign Purposes For This World

There's no doubt that Good Friday looked like a pretty bleak time. Jesus had been arrested. Tried in kangaroo court, and condemned to die all in a few hours. The one heralded as Messiah was turned on by the Jewish crowd that had hailed Him as king just a few days before. He was beaten almost beyond recognition by brutal Roman soldiers and the nailed to a cross and executed.

Turn to Mark 15 901 Read verses 29-32

Could you imagine being a disciple who had left all to follow Jesus? You saw Him heal the sick and even raise the dead. You hear Him give some pointed challenges to the Jewish leadership. You thought He feared no one. He always spoke the truth.

Now suddenly the strong one looks totally and absolutely powerless. What happened to the miraculous? What happened to the fiery speeches? What happened to the One who accepted the adoration of the crowds who cried out, *Blessed is the*

King who comes in the name of the LORD!' Peace in heaven and glory in the highest! (Luke 19:38)

Now he was stripped naked, nailed to a cross and the target of the most degrading insults.

The disciples faith was being stretched to the max. Life was colliding head-on with what they believed.

Even though there's hundreds of verses that speak of God's authority and sovereignty they found they couldn't trust Him. Their experience said one thing and the Bible promised another.

So what did they do? Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We are going with you also." (John 21:2,3)

Turn to Luke Chapter 24 Page 936

This is Sunday after the crucifixion.

Read verses 13-16 These are 2 of Jesus' followers who had been in Jerusalem for Passover. This was one of three required religious celebrations that Jewish males were required to attend. Some people traveled a long way to get there. Fortunately for these guys it was just 7 miles into town so they could easily walk in in a few hours.

As they go another man meets up with them. This happens to be Jesus but they don't know it. He's been raised from the dead but He withholds His identity from them.

Read verses 17-21

We had really pinned our hopes on this Jesus of Nazareth. We all thought that He was Israel's Messiah and the savior of the world. But they killed Him. In fact He's been dead for 3 days. We can't believe it because He just seemed to fill all the Messianic qualifications.

They go on to say, “There was a rumor that He had risen but our friends went to check it out and they didn’t see Him.”

Read verse 25-27

Talk about the ultimate small group Bible study! Noticed what Jesus did. *And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.*

The death of Jesus Christ wasn’t some tragic turn of events. It wasn’t something that just happened. It was in the works ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden.

In fact, the Bible says it was planned even before that. *He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.* (I Peter 1:20)

The promises of God were in the pages of scripture. Jesus started in Genesis and showed the two disciples how the message of redemption and His salvation was woven all through the Bible.

The sovereign Lord had a plan. The disciples missed that plan even though Jesus told them repeatedly. The two on the road to Emmaus didn’t get it even though they knew about Jesus’ preaching and miracle working. The Pharisees and Sadducees who were Bible scholars didn’t begin to grasp who Jesus was. They only saw Him as a troublemaker who was going to upset their privileged positions.

The people wavered back and forth and in the end turned on Jesus.

Our Creator is working out His sovereign purposes for this world and sometimes His plan involves pain and suffering.

If our faith is shallow or misdirected it’s going to be easy for us to get discouraged. We’re going to be overcome with hopelessness.

Bob Sjogren, writing in Mission Frontiers magazine, said, “Just as there are two sides to a coin, there are two sides to the cross. For generations, many in the church have only known one side of the cross. It’s a side that can point to ease and comfort.

But it's now time for the Church to grow up and look at the other side-the one that points us to suffering."

"If we are only focused on the familiar side of the cross we look there and say, 'Christ suffered and died for me.' Since Christ suffered for me (and since He loves me) He must not want me to suffer. He did all the suffering for me."

"From this we conclude that God wants us to have a safe, soft, comfortable, happy life-no pain, no crying, no mourning. Instead of living for God, we believe that God lives for us. So we think, 'If Jesus lives for me, I'm going to be like Jesus. I'll live for me too. I'll just do it in a Christian context. Suffering? Why would God want us to suffer?'"

He's right, isn't he? We think that the cross was all about us so life should be all about us. We reason, since God loves us then there shouldn't be any pain. And then when there is we become disillusioned with God. We think, "Wait a minute. I thought God loved me and has a wonderful plan for my life. This isn't what I expected. I'm giving up on God."

Listen to what Jesus says is the purpose of the cross. *Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name. Then a voice came from heaven, saying, "I have both glorified it and will glorify it again."* (John 12:27-28)

That's the real purpose for the cross. The real purpose is so that the character of God might be shown to everyone. The real purpose of the cross is to display the holiness, the justice, the grace, and the mercy of the living God, not to make life go my way.

The brutal death of Jesus ought to drive home to us that sometimes the ultimate purposes of God can only be accomplished through suffering.

So how do we know that the cross accomplished God's sovereign purpose?

The Bible says, *Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father.* (Romans 6:4)

Ephesians 1 says Christ was raised by the power of the Father, *according to the working of His (God's) mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead.* (Ephesians 1:19-20)

Romans 1 says the resurrection declared Jesus to be the Son of God. *Jesus Christ our Lord, who was ... declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.* (Romans 1:3,4)

The Bible says the resurrection demonstrates that Christ is the judge. *He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.* (Acts 17:31)

God is glorified by the cross. He had a plan all the time. And the exclamation point to all that happened at the cross is the empty tomb.

One more thing. The resurrection gives us hope for eternity. *God will credit righteousness--for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.* (Romans 4:24,25)

If Christ died on a cross for our sins but never rose, we'd have no hope. The resurrection confirmed that God was working out His sovereign purpose for this world.

Where do we look when our faith and our life seem to collide? The cross and the empty tomb. It's the perfect reminder that God is at work even if His working is beyond what we can understand.

We began with Brian and Louise Hogan and the loss of their infant son. Can we trust God, even with something so painful as the loss of a child?

Brain explains, On Thanksgiving, 1997, Baika Puntsag, the pastor of America's first Mongolian Christian church said, "I became a believer in Jesus through the death of Jed. A friend shared about the shock you experienced at Jedidiah's death. But she also told about your response to the tragedy."

"In Mongolia no one has hope for life after death. Mothers in my country sometimes lose their minds at the death of a child. You and Louise were the first people we had ever seen who grieved with hope."

"You were being watched, then and over the months that followed. seeing you grieve with hope filled the gaping hole that has always been in every Mongolian

heart. When I heard about your grief, I knew it was all real. The Bible, Jesus, heaven, all of it.”

“Since that day other Mongolians have shared variations on Baika’s story. At the point where we felt our weakest and doubted God’s plan the most, the Father was doing His biggest miracle through us.”

What do you do when, seemingly out of the blue, life collides with your faith? What do you do when what you thought was going to happen doesn't and instead something unexpected, even painful, hits you instead? How do we face life’s greatest challenges when we don’t have all the answers?

First look at the cross and see the place where the Father poured out His wrath. By faith, trust Jesus Christ our Savior for forgiveness. Then look at the empty tomb. And celebrate the proof that God’s plan will always come to pass.