

Coaching through Disappointment: Working with Relational Pain in the Christmas Season

By Ron Marsh

The Christmas season is filled with wonderful times with family and friends. The exchanging of gifts, the lights, the music, and who can forget the celebration of Christ's birth all help us "get into the spirit." While Christmas is usually a time of celebration, it is for many a difficult time of year. There are the memories of years gone by, a loved one passed, the scars of a failed relationship, the deep longing for a significant relationship, the painful inability to have a child, a business gone sour, or an overwhelming financial crisis. These are just some of the things that make Christmas not so Merry for some.

This time of year has a way of pushing the past in our face. With that we're often faced with life's greatest disappointments. To be disappointed according to Webster means "to fail to meet the expectation or hope of." So, you could say that disappointment has its roots in our unmet expectations.

Mary's and Joseph's Disappointment

When you think of the first Christmas in Bethlehem, disappointment is not the image that usually comes to mind. If you look closely at the narrative, however, there's plenty of disappointment to be found in the story of Christ's birth. Imagine the conversation between Joseph and Mary when Mary tells him, "I'm pregnant and God's the Father." Can you imagine that conversation? There was probably some disappointment. The Bible says, "Joseph had a mind to divorce her." Did you get that? They almost called the whole thing off. Mary expected a wedding, children at the right time, and a great life. Joseph expected a blissful courtship and a wedding night filled with physical intimacy enjoying his new bride. None of that ever happened. When Mary finally gave birth to the child, they were in a smelly stable. No crib. No bed to rest in. Surely they had prepared, with great excitement, a special place in their home for the newborn. The census, however, killed any expectation of having the child in their own home.

How did Mary and Joseph deal with their disappointment? It's interesting to note what they didn't do. Neither demanded that they have the comforts of home. You don't read anywhere in the story that they began to throw a pity party. There's no hint of jealousy towards those staying at the inn nearby while Mary is in labor. We don't even see Mary blaming Joseph for not planning ahead nor Joseph blaming Mary for getting them into this mess. How did they do it?

Mary's and Joseph's Principles

Here are just a couple principles we can learn from them. First, they listened to what God had to say. Remember when the angel visited Mary with the message of God's plan, she pondered what he had said and then she questioned him, "How can this be...?" She asked the question and the angel responded, "For nothing is impossible with God." That's all Mary needed. Slap that on your disappointment. Nothing is impossible with God. You see, we may never really depend on God until we have an impossible circumstance. These are moments in our journey

where we experience God like never before. Perhaps your plan has been tossed aside, and now like Mary, there's a new plan...God's plan. Like her, that plan may not fit into the realm of possibility for you. However, "Nothing is impossible with God."

Joseph also heard from God via this special messenger, which brings us to our second principle: Joseph acted in obedience to what God had to say. God said, "Joseph, I want you to marry her." He did. God said, "Joseph, I want you to remain pure for nine months." He did. God said, "Joseph, the baby's life is threatened. Move down to Egypt." He moved to Egypt. "Joseph, move back to Israel." He moved to Israel. Whatever God said, that's what Joseph did.

Thirdly, they saw the Grand Plan. It's been said that "disappointments in life are often God's appointments." The scripture says, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us." You see, hundreds of years before this happened to Mary and Joseph, God had said that this is what He was going to do. There was a Grand Plan. Mary and Joseph knew that God had a purpose. While all of this might have been disappointing for them, it was God's appointment, a part of the Grand Plan.

Disappointments can be challenging to get past and continue to plague us for years. The challenge for all of us is: How can we grow from them? This month we've included a coaching exercise to help you address disappointments and unmet expectations.

Dealing With Disappointments Exercise #1

When faced with disappointment, get together with someone you trust or the favorite coach in your life and ask the following questions:

1. On a scale of 1-10. Rate your current level of disappointment. Why did you give it this rating?
2. What are you facing right now when it comes to disappointment?
3. When you look at your life what disappointments seem to get in your way?
4. From your perspective what have they brought into your life?
5. What is God making you aware of as you work through this disappointment?
6. If you could paint me a picture with you working through this disappointment in a way that was life-giving, what would that look like?
7. What have you done up to this point to deal with the disappointment?
8. How have you overcome disappointments in the past?

9. What options do you see available to you right now that will help you through your disappointment?

10. Which of those options would you like to put into practice today?

Exercise #2

Read through the Christmas story in the gospels. As you read, list out any expectations the people in the story might have had based on their role and place in life. (i.e. Mary, Joseph, magi, shepherds).

☐ How did each of them respond?

☐ How do you think you would have responded?

☐ What principles could you draw from the scripture that would help you or others face disappointment?

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