



HOPE IN SORROW

REFLECTIONS ON GRIEF, DEPRESSION & DEATH

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INTRODUCTION

This is the second book in a series, made up of articles written over the years and collected together according to their theme. The first was *Faith in Crisis*, thirty brief articles looking at issues such as faith, trust, doubt and questions of God's character.

Hope in Sorrow gathers several longer articles on the topics of grief, depression, stress and death. Some were written for the church to which I belong (St Albans in Highgate, Perth). Others come from my blog, *Rumours of Hope* (rumoursofhope.blogspot.com). I pray that they might bring comfort and encourage a new sense of hope in those who read them.

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PART 1: GRIEF

1. **BEREAVEMENT**

Most of us live each day as if what we have is ours to keep, and life is under our control. Each day we are reminded that this is a delusion. Most reminders are trivial—the seedlings we planted are eaten by snails, a friend has a migraine and can't come to lunch. Sometimes the reminders become more painful—drought destroys our garden, the friend moves interstate. Then comes a reminder that turns our whole life upside down—we lose our job and with it our means of paying the mortgage, our closest friend dies suddenly.

Bereavement

Each of these reminders about our lack of control over life involves a loss, and loss brings grief. Of all the griefs we experience, the death of someone close to us is the most traumatic. The word bereavement comes from an old English word, "reave" which means "to deprive forcibly, to strip or rob". Bereavement tears people apart.

After the initial shock of the death itself (which continues to be shocking no matter how well prepared we think we are), most people experience a period of numbness or detachment. This serves to cushion them from the full impact of the loss. It may last a few hours or a few days, and often allows the bereaved person to make

necessary arrangements, and even attend the funeral, with apparent serenity.

However, the initial calm usually gives way to a period of mental and emotional turmoil. Intense yearning for the one who is lost, a constant rehearsing of memories of their appearance and the events surrounding their death, feelings of being disconnected from the real world, and a sense of anxiety, fear, even panic, are all part of the turmoil. Tears come unbidden. Endless questions arise: Could I, or the doctors, have done things differently? How will I cope? Where is my loved one now? Why did God let this happen?

The questions are sometimes accompanied by feelings of guilt or anger and the need to find someone to blame. Some people are disturbed to find themselves angry with the one who has died, or with God. While some Christians find God's presence an immediate comfort, not all do. After his wife's death, C S Lewis wrote "...go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside."¹ Only later did he become aware of God's presence again.

Some of this anger gradually resolves as reality comes back into focus. Some of it is released by talking it through with someone willing to listen without judging. Some requires

¹ C.S. Lewis. *A Grief Observed*, 1961

work to overcome problems and offer forgiveness. Likewise, most guilt is eventually recognized as unreasonable, but where there is a genuine reason to feel guilt, there will be the need for confession and forgiveness.

Along with the yearning and the anger comes a restlessness, as though the mourner is searching for the one who is lost. They may imagine they see them in a crowd, or in a familiar place. Their mind tells them that it is impossible but their heart leaps for a moment, before falling back into confusion and sadness. Sometimes a dream or vision of the one lost brings a lasting sense of peace.

Eventually the first task of grieving is accomplished, and the bereaved person comes to accept the reality of their loss. This may bring on a state closely resembling depression. Life seems colourless, hopeless and empty. Nothing seems worthwhile and everything is an effort. Many of the physical symptoms of depression are present - sleeplessness, lack of appetite, vague aches and pains. While the grief may not be as intense now, a photo, a song or a special date can trigger a new wave of yearning and tears, and can do so for years to come.

The second major task of those who are grieving is to accommodate to their new situation and reconstruct their lives without the one lost. This is not simple. All sorts of secondary losses must be accepted and dealt with. For instance, a

woman whose husband dies loses not only his presence and companionship, but the skills he brought into their family life, his financial contribution, her own role as a wife, often her place socially among other married couples, and a host of other intangibles. Yet despite the difficulties, most people do eventually come to a place where grief is more a tender scar than an open wound.

Grief is individual.

While this is the general pattern of grief following a bereavement, everyone grieves in their own way, depending on several factors. Age is an obvious one—children and teenagers respond to death differently than adults. Very young children are often affected more by the emotions and behaviour of those around them than by the death itself, which they cannot understand.

Men and women tend to express grief differently. Women in Western cultures usually cry more readily in public than men. That is not to say that men do not weep, but some prefer to keep their tears private. Men often find expressing grief through rituals and activity more beneficial than talking about it (although women may also find rituals helpful.)

The nature of the person's relationship with the one who died affects grief. Obviously, the closer the relationship, the more grief is likely to be felt. But sometimes a seemingly close

relationship (for instance a marriage) can be quite emotionally distant, giving rise to ambivalent feelings after the death. Where death has followed a long and painful illness, those who grieve may feel a sense of relief that the suffering is over.

The closeness of a relationship and the depth of grief being experienced may not be recognised by others. After the death of a parent, a son or daughter may find that people are so concerned for the bereaved spouse that their own grief is overlooked. A close friend may grieve as intensely as any relative, but their grief goes unnoticed.

Previous experience of loss affects how people grieve. Someone who has never experienced bereavement before has no way of knowing what to expect and may be surprised by their own reaction. Unresolved grief from the past can be reopened by a relatively minor loss. Repeated losses, without time to work through them, may overwhelm even the most stable person.

Related to experience are a person's beliefs and attitudes towards death, and the culture from which they come. Most cultures have prescribed ways of expressing grief. It is important to let people grieve in their own way, without judging it as excessive or stifled.

Being part of a community such as a church is generally helpful in dealing with grief. The more isolated a person is, the more difficulty they are likely to have in working through loss. Bereavement is associated with a higher rate of

illness, including mental illness and infection, in the year following the death, but having adequate support tends to mitigate this effect.

While many people are starting to cope normally after six to nine months, and are almost fully over the death after two years, there is no set time frame for the grief of bereavement. Anniversaries can remain a source of pain and bittersweet memories for many years to come.

Helping the bereaved.

Faced with another person's grief, most of us desperately want to do something to help relieve their pain. Yet there is no cure or quick fix for grief. Practical help such as providing a meal, baby sitting or taking the dog for a walk is usually welcome. Sometimes it's helpful to have someone take over the running of the household for a few days. However, those who are grieving often need their own routine and activity to help reduce feelings of restlessness and anxiety.

What do you say to someone who is grieving? Pray for wisdom, but generally it's best just to say how you feel; "I'm sorry", "I'm thinking of you", "I'll really miss". Then listen. Don't feel that you have to answer their questions (there usually are no satisfactory answers) or defend God or the medical profession from their anger.

Cards and letters are another way of expressing care, not just at the time of the death, but over the following months. If you want to use

words of scripture to encourage the bereaved, be aware that some people find the biblical laments such as Psalm 88 more helpful than the more obviously uplifting texts such as Psalm 23. They are a reminder that others have gone through the same trials before us.

One of the most important things we can do is to acknowledge another's grief as legitimate and allow them to grieve in their own way. Being there to listen, without embarrassment, and without offering false cheer, is helpful to most grieving people. Continuing to pray for them over the following year or so is a gift of love. The only way beyond the pain of grief is through it, but we all need someone from the sidelines to encourage us.

2. HINDRANCES TO GRIEVING

We saw in the chapter on bereavement that grief has to do with loss, and that those who grieve have two main tasks. The first is to realize and accept the full extent of their loss. The second is to adjust to living without what they have lost.

The grief of bereavement is profound. Most of us value our relationships with people above everything else. But death is not the only cause of grief in our lives. We face all kinds of losses, some minor, others of greater importance to us. Yet we don't always recognize the grief we feel or allow it to run its course and bring the healing we need.

Hidden grief

Sometimes we have difficulty grieving because others don't realize the extent of our grief. We are expected to "just get over" losses such as the end of a friendship, moving to a new house, disability in ourselves or someone in our family, a miscarriage, the death of a much-loved pet or being made redundant.

No-one sends us flowers because we didn't win the contract we wanted. We're not given compassionate leave because we've just learned that we're infertile. Grief is very disturbing to a

society that makes 'Be Happy' the main purpose of life.

Some losses are even more private and unrecognized. We all have dreams and ideals. Very few of them are ever achieved. Perhaps as children we dreamed of becoming a top-class athlete or pianist, but we never quite made the grade.

We may have longed for the day when our parents would express their love for us, but they never did. We may have had a clear idea of the sort of man or woman we would marry, only to find that our real spouse is anything but that ideal person. Our own children may be a source of deep disappointment.

Other losses are very real but, because of their nature, grieving publicly is considered unacceptable—so-called "disenfranchised grief". The end of an adulterous affair can cause intense grief, even if it is ended voluntarily. So can having a son or daughter convicted of a serious crime. Being raped or sexually abused produces devastating losses, yet those who grieve such losses often do so in secret.

Sometimes people are unable to grieve properly because they feel ambivalent about their loss. Their deceased spouse was aggressive or alcoholic. Their absent friend was often critical and judgmental. They've lost a job that paid well but was boring. Accepting the full truth of such

situations is necessary before they can deal with their grief.

Children and those with mental disabilities may have their grief overlooked because they don't have the ability to express it in a recognizable way. Younger children may act out their emotions by misbehaving or behaving strangely. Teenagers may refuse to talk about their grief and are also liable to act out. A significant loss, at a time when they are just establishing who they are in the world, can be very difficult for them to cope with.

Lack of adequate social support makes the grieving process more difficult. Sharing how we feel, either in words, or by carrying out recognized rituals of grieving, is an important part of the grief process.

Our society has very few grief rituals, even for the bereaved. After the Bali bombing in 2002 we witnessed the (sometimes misguided) creativity of people trying desperately to find adequate ways to express their grief.

Those who are socially isolated are more likely to suffer the effects of unresolved grief. Being part of a church community is usually helpful but can sometimes be a mixed blessing. Misguided exhortations to "rejoice always" can add an extra burden of guilt to a Christian's grief.

The bereaved can be made to feel that they have no right to grieve when their loved one is happily by God's side. When Paul told us not to

grieve like those who have no hope (see 1 Thessalonians 4.13) he surely meant "grieve with hope" rather than "don't grieve."

Grief gone wrong

Sometimes people become "stuck" in the grief process, resulting in unhealed pain which expresses itself in other ways such as anxiety or depression. Some may not even realize or accept that they have experienced a loss. A person going through divorce may persuade themselves that it's the best thing that ever happened to them.

Lost dreams and ideals are often overlooked as a source of grief. Sometimes they are held onto as a form of wishful thinking and regret ("if only..."). Grief that arises from what a person acknowledges as sin (for instance, the loss of a child through abortion or the loss of an adulterous relationship) may be pushed aside because grieving seems to compound the sin.

People may try to avoid the pain of grief by numbing it with medication, drugs, alcohol, activity or even religion. Unfortunately, this sometimes results in an addiction which can only be healed when the grief itself is dealt with.

Others try bargaining to reduce the impact of the loss. "If God let's my child live, I'll pray and read my Bible every day". Bargains are a subtle way of trying to control an uncontrollable situation

and can result in a lot of anger when God (or fate) "fail" to keep their side of the bargain.

The anger that often accompanies grief usually resolves itself or is resolved through forgiveness. But sometimes it continues to grow into an intense bitterness, resentment or rage. The angry person may begin a single-minded pursuit of those whom they blame for their loss, either through the courts, or personally. In other cases, resentment over what has happened prevents a person from taking any steps to rebuild their own lives.

Sometimes the symptoms of depression which accompany grief become a long-term problem, requiring counselling or medical help. Apart from its duration, one indication that the normal sorrow of grief has become abnormal depression is the person's feelings about themselves. In grief, most people retain their sense of self-worth. They can see that what they're feeling is a result of what has happened, and have some hope, even if just a glimmer, that things will improve. The depressed are more likely to believe that they feel as they do because they're no good, and see little hope of improvement.

Healthy grieving

The only way to avoid grief is to desire nothing and love no-one. Some philosophies and religions encourage people to do just that. There's even a

strand within Christianity which says, "detach yourself from everything in this world and love dispassionately." But God calls us to enjoy what he has made, to love compassionately. That inevitably means we will experience grief.

Grief is a normal human response to all kinds of loss, as the Bible makes clear. Abraham mourned for Sarah (Gen 23.2), Hannah grieved over her barrenness (1 Sam 1.16), the prophets grieved over the sins of their people, the Ephesians wept as Paul left them to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20.37-38). Nowhere in the Bible are we promised a life free from grief, in fact quite the opposite is true.

Healthy grieving involves facing loss and the pain it brings, not with self-pity, but with honesty. We need to be realistic about what we feel and find courage to endure it. Despite what the world tells us, it's okay to feel sad, confused and even angry for a while.

Healthy grieving takes time, and requires patience, not only with our own progress, but with those around us, who may not understand what we're going through. It takes time to come to a full realization of what the loss means to us, and the secondary losses involved.

It also takes time and courage to adjust to our new situation. The more we are able to see loss and grief as an opportunity to learn and grow, the better we will adjust. We could spend a lifetime wishing that things were different, but it's only

when we accept what is real that we can come to the Lord and say, "Please help me deal with this".

In addition to accepting loss and adjusting to it, healthy grief takes us one stage further. It teaches us to accept that we're not in control of our lives and everything that happens to us. This is true humility. Many people simply deny this disturbing truth once their grief settles. Others avoid it by making much of being in control of their own thoughts and actions.

But Christians live in the assurance that while we cannot control our lives, the God who *is* in control loves us and cares for us. Even when our grief is the result of our own sin, God continues to care for us and comfort us when we turn to him.

3. COMMUNAL GRIEF

The effect on a small community of a great loss, such as through a death, fire, drought, or closure of an important facility, is much the same as a loss for the individual. Following the initial shock caused by the news, people go about dealing with it, for a time, without much sense of the reality of what has happened. Those who are most directly affected are comforted, and provided for, sometimes to the point of being overwhelmed.

Arrangements for activities such as a funeral or memorial service are made and publicized. People talk cautiously, hesitantly about what has happened. The whole community seems to come together, united in their grief. Even those who are only peripherally involved feel sad, confused and emotionally affected.

The formalities of any memorial or farewell ceremonies are very important in helping people come to terms with what has happened. But later, frictions can start to arise, as people deal with their grief in their own way. Some will look for someone to blame for what happened. Those who are least affected by the loss, and those who deal with grief by just getting on with life, may feel irritated by those who want to dwell on it. There may be disagreements about how soon the

community should go back to normal activities which have been cancelled for a while.

With time, the community integrates what has happened into its history and understanding of itself. This may happen well before those most directly affected come to terms with their own loss. While they are grateful for the support they have received, they may feel pressured to put things behind them. Moving away from being the centre of attention in the community is a loss in itself.

Those in the community who have some sort of ministry role—clergy, medical staff, the police—may have their own grief overlooked as they deal with everyone else's' problems. They may even fail to recognize it themselves. Often, they have been closely involved with the people and the events surrounding the loss, but sometimes have no avenue for sharing what they are going through. They are expected to continue to be professional and caring.

The grieving congregation

A church is a small community, and in many ways will deal with losses and grief in much the same way as other communities. Its greatest asset is its belief that God is in control, that he works all things together for good, and what happens in this life is in preparation for what is to come.

Besides the death of one of their members, churches face other losses from time to time:

falling numbers, the closure, or failure, of a long-term project, separation and divorce within the flock, the member who leaves the church because of an unresolved disagreement.

The departure of its ordained minister or pastor is one of the more challenging losses a church must face. If the minister is forced to resign, the situation can become so complex and unpleasant that outside help is needed to prevent the church from falling apart. But even where the minister leaves of his or her own choice, grief is inevitable.

Those who have been friends, or worked closely with the minister, will feel grief over their personal loss. Others will grieve the loss of an important figurehead or parent figure. Those who dislike change will feel anxious. A few will be indifferent to the news, some may even welcome it, but overall, the church will begin a time of grieving.

The departing minister has his or her own griefs to contend with. No matter how excited they may be about what lies ahead of them, they face the loss of a community they have loved, worked among and labored for over many years. They leave behind friends and colleagues, a familiar home, and the status and acceptance provided by the church. They have the grief of their family to contend with, whether they take them with them or leave them behind.

They also leave behind ministries started but not yet come to fruition, and counselling and mentoring tasks which they will not be there to see through to completion. They may have fears about what will happen to the church, and about the future of ministries which they have spent years building up. While they remain, they must cope with the grief caused by their leaving. They may fear being forgotten or being overwhelmed by the formalities and emotion of saying farewell.

As time goes on, frictions may arise between those who want to get on with the process of finding a new minister, and those who want, or need, more time to grieve their loss. Tempers may flare as people start to discuss, and disagree on, the merits of the departed minister and who should replace them.

Some people may leave, either because they feel uncomfortable with the uncertainty of the situation, or because their allegiance was to the minister rather than to the church. Some may see the vacuum created by the minister's departure as an opportunity to increase their own power within the church.

More positively, some will discover ministries and gifts with which to serve the church in the absence of the minister—gifts of leadership, administration, pastoring and so on. Others will come to realize, for the first time, that the church is a ministering community, gathered around Christ rather than around one pastor-preacher.

The formal process of choosing and appointing a new minister is another potential (perhaps inevitable) source of friction. But it can also be an opportunity for the church to focus on its vision and purpose, to see things in a new light and express its dependence upon God.

The arrival of the new appointee (months, perhaps even a year down the track) brings a mixture of joy and apprehension. No matter how likeable he or she is, no matter how well they carry out their ministry role, comparisons will be made with the old minister. Grief will be felt again for a while. Any changes made will bring more grief, especially for those who have identified themselves with a particular ministry or role in a possessive way.

It may take two or more years for the new minister to fully establish his or her place in the church, and for the grief to resolve. The changeover process is more likely to run smoothly if people are allowed, even encouraged, to express their grief initially. Those who go on grieving may need help to resolve it.

Those who are anxious to get on with things need to be patient with those who are still grieving, and vice versa. The selection process should not be rushed simply to fill the vacuum. Disagreements need to be aired in a caring and forgiving atmosphere. Those who take on the roles vacated by the previous minister during the interim need to be supported in love and prayer.

Most important, an attitude of genuine trust that God is dependable and is in control needs to be cultivated by everyone.

PART 2: DEPRESSION & STRESS

4. THE DEPRESSED CHRISTIAN

Demons, doubt or disease?

Sunday morning church: I don't want to be here, but I know that if I don't make the effort, I'll be drawn deeper into the cold grey fog inside my head. I try to avoid catching the eye of the usher. "How are you?" she asks. "Fine" I say.

"Liar!" I say to myself.

I sit down and pretend to read the pew sheet. I don't want to talk to anyone. The first hymn means nothing to me, but I mouth the words. The Bible reading means nothing to me, but at least it's soothing in its familiarity. The sermon means nothing to me. I hear it, but only with my ears.

"Listen," I tell myself, "this is important!" But the more I try to take it in, the more empty I feel. Soon the dark thoughts that have been churning around my brain since the early hours of the morning return. I'm weary of fighting them. I'm weary of being weary.

Now there's a song of praise, but it too is meaningless. Around me, people are singing joyfully, raising their hands in worship. I try to sing, but I choke on the words. Why? Why can't I worship?

"For heaven's sake, pull yourself together!" I tell myself.

"I can't," I say.

"Of course you can, you're just being lazy and self-pitying", I tell myself. "Lots of people here have problems much worse than yours." Now the tears come. Help me, Lord!

During prayer time I walk out. At last, alone, I stop shaking and feel calmer. I wash my face and go into the hall for coffee. I should be looking out for people, I should be talking to people, I should be...

I can't. I can't face anyone, I can't feel for them, I can't bear their pain on top of my own. I can't share my pain with them. I spot a stranger and open a conversation with him. It's all small talk, but it makes me feel more normal again.

Empty, but outwardly normal.

Depressed Christians

Depression and other mental illnesses pose a problem for Christians. If we really believe that our security is in Christ, that God is an all-powerful and loving father, that the gospel offers us hope, joy and peace whatever the circumstances, how can we become depressed? Shouldn't we be able to overcome every difficulty through prayer and faith in God? Isn't being depressed a sign of lack of faith?

Those who suffer from physical illness are usually willing to talk openly about their condition and seek sympathy and prayer. In contrast, the depressed Christian is likely to confide only in a few trusted friends or may even hide their

condition completely. It's not the sort of thing most would want announced as a prayer point in the church bulletin.

Depression is often seen as a sign of weakness. The Christian who suffers from depression may blame themselves for their illness and feel inferior to those whose faith is more uniformly joyful. A sense of failure can continue to dog the sufferer even after the depression begins to lift. Ironically, this tends to prolong their illness, makes it less likely that they will seek help and sets them up for further episodes of depression in future.

Is it just a spiritual problem?

Some believers consider depression to be a purely spiritual problem, and view psychology and psychiatrists with deep suspicion. Whether willingly or in ignorance, they argue, the depressed person must have allowed Satan to get a foothold in their life. Perhaps their understanding of the gospel is inadequate. Or perhaps they are holding onto some unconfessed sin such as anger.

Freud's theory that depression is caused by in-turned anger remains popular, even though there is very little evidence to support it. There is good evidence, however, that any sort of significant loss in childhood predisposes people to later depressive illness.

Whatever the cause, the solution offered is to confront the sin and confess it, be delivered from Satan's power and seek healing through prayer.

It's true that the guilt arising from unconfessed sin can lead to a form of depression, which resolves once the sin is dealt with. Occasionally a moody person needs to be told to stop being self-pitying and manipulative and get on with life. On the other hand, one of the features of depression is a morbid preoccupation with real and imagined sins and a sense of guiltiness. When the depression is treated, the guilt feelings disappear.

It's also true that some form of exorcism is sometimes effective. In his book on depression, *The Masks of Melancholy*², Christian psychiatrist and author John White described a few of his cases where such a casting out of demons brought instantaneous relief. Most of his patients, however, responded to more conventional treatments. It's difficult to see how taking tablets or talking to a secular counsellor (both effective forms of treatment for many people) could expel demons.

Another Christian doctor and preacher, Martin Lloyd Jones, wrote about the malaise felt by those who have failed to grasp the full implications of

² John White. *The Masks of Melancholy: A Christian Physician Looks at Depression & Suicide*. IVP 1982

the gospel. His book, *Spiritual Depression*³, is well worth reading. Undoubtedly lack of faith or lack of understanding can lead to a form of depression, which is best dealt with by prayer and counselling. But again, those with a depressive illness will often attribute their illness to spiritual causes and agonise over spiritual problems, which resolve when the depression is treated medically.

Confusing the issue is the fact that the term "depression" is used very loosely in the community. We often talk about being depressed when what we really mean is we're disappointed, disillusioned, tired, or sad. Even in medical circles, where the diagnosis of depression can only be made if a certain cluster of symptoms and signs are present over time, a wide spectrum of conditions are described as depression. One person may become agitated and irritable when depressed, another becomes sluggish and mute, while a third is mostly sad and tearful.

The fact that depression is associated with chemical and physiological changes in the brain does not necessarily rule out spiritual causes. Illness, pain and suffering are ultimately a spiritual problem, related to the fact that we are sinful people living in a fallen world. Satan delights in using our weaknesses to draw us away from serving God. The "sins of our fore-fathers" visit us

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*. 1965

in the form of genetic traits and learned ways of reacting to the world that can predispose us to depression.

Is it just a medical problem?

Many Christians, particularly those with a medical background, see depression as an illness, no different to diabetes or arthritis. As evidence they cite the chemical and structural changes found in the brain of those with depression, the dramatic effect of medication on the course of depression, and the tendency for depression to run in families. While depression may be triggered by life stresses and events, there seems to be an underlying predisposition.

The idea that depression is a disorder caused by chemical and physical changes in the brain is a difficult one to grasp, not least because we prefer not to think of our mind as a chemical process. If our thoughts are at the mercy of the chemical cocktail around our synapses, what sort of creatures are we? What control do we have over our mind and emotions? And where is that elusive thing we call our spirit to be found?

Recent research has shown that not only can the chemical and physiological changes in the depressed brain be corrected by medication, they can also be changed by some forms of counselling. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), in which the patient is taught to recognise their own negative thinking patterns and replace them with more

positive, helpful thoughts, produces changes in the structure of the brain similar to those caused by antidepressants.

If changing our thoughts can correct the brain abnormalities caused by depression, can depression be avoided by learning to think differently? The answer seems to be a guarded "yes".

What's more, the changes in thinking brought about by religious experience also seem to be protective. Several studies have suggested that people with a strong faith (any faith, not just Christians) are less likely to develop depressive illnesses than those with no faith. If they do become depressed, they are less likely to suffer from feelings of hopelessness and despair and tend to recover more rapidly.

One Australian study found that sixty-five per cent of patients with depression, anxiety and other psychological conditions wanted their spirituality to be considered in their treatment. In contrast, only ten per cent of psychiatrists thought the patient's spiritual life important in treatment.

In another Australian study, those given fourteen sessions of spiritual counselling in the hospital chapel (meditation, prayer, relaxation techniques, and a focus on hope, forgiveness and the meaning and purpose of life) did better than a control group who received only supportive secular counselling. Both groups received psychiatric treatment at the same time.

Many Christians do suffer from depression, and not just those whose faith is weak. It is quite common amongst clergy and others in ministry. While Christians have good reason to be more hopeful and less despairing than other people, they also experience pressures and expectations that others do not.

Even in churches that preach a gospel of grace, subtle pressures to conform to a certain standard of living or pattern of behaviour are common. Those in full-time ministry experience both external and internal pressure to "perform", to be endlessly available and perfectly gracious. In the susceptible person, such pressures may lead to depression.

Does depression have a purpose?

The idea that depression indicates poorly developed faith or lack of character looks shaky when we look at some of the Christians of the past who suffered from bouts of depression. John Bunyan, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Amy Carmichael, Charles Spurgeon, William Cowper, and Frances Ridley Havergal are well known examples. If anything, dealing with episodes of depression seems to have strengthened the faith and character of such people. At the very least, it seems clear that God shows no sign of rejecting those who are weakened by depression.

No-one who has ever been depressed would wish to go through the experience again (though

many do.) Yet there are those who feel that God uses the experience of depression to good purpose.

Archibald Hart, an American psychologist, writes "(D)epression performs a very important function. It triggers a series of important responses in the body to deal with the chaos in life." He goes on to explain that "The symptoms of depression - low mood, lack of energy, social withdrawal, and loss of interest in normal activities - force us to retreat from the demands of life so that psychic repair...can take place."

Or as one Christian friend of mine puts it, "Sometimes God brings us to a halt in order to make us spend time *with* him, instead of always doing things *for* him."

This concept of depression as a dark place where our lives are put on hold for a time, while inner changes are taking place, isn't found in medical texts. For many sufferers, especially those without faith, depression can be a destructive, even fatal condition. But several writers, both Christian and secular, see the possibility of meaning and purpose in depression, which needs to be explored.

Sometimes Christians who have come through the darkness of a depressive illness discover that it hasn't been an entirely negative experience. Often their faith has been strengthened by holding onto a God who at times seemed far away and uncaring. They've learned

that God is still there in the dark. Perhaps they have more humility, knowing that sometimes they will have to depend on others to carry them through. They may have developed greater compassion for those who are suffering or place less reliance on earthly security. Scriptures that once seemed negative and uninspiring take on new depths of meaning. The area of growth will be personal and unique.

That's not to say that depressed Christians should shun medical treatment. Without it, depression can be a prolonged and incapacitating illness. The pain of those who are depressed is usually shared by those around them, especially family. We should gratefully accept and use whatever God has provided for relief, with prayer for healing and medical treatment going hand in hand.

But once the depression begins to lift, it is worth prayerfully reflecting on what God might have been trying to teach us or say to us. How are we changed? What still needs to change?

Sunday morning. Six long weeks have passed. I stop to speak to the welcomers at the church door and say a cheerful "good morning" to the usher. It's difficult to sing—the tablets I'm taking have made my mouth dry—but my heart is singing. The bible reading and sermon feed my mind and lift my spirit. I'm not completely well yet, but I know that healing is taking place. After

*living in the valley of the shadow for so long, it's
good to be back in the sunlight again*

5. STRESS

What is stress?

In physics, "stress" can refer either to the pressure applied to an object, or to the internal resistance of the object itself. When people speak of being "stressed" there is a similar ambiguity.

Stress, in the sense of an applied pressure, is not always detrimental. Stress from outside can motivate us to begin and complete tasks. However, what most people mean by "stress" is a sense of being overwhelmed and overloaded. They feel as if their internal resistance is at breaking point.

Life has been difficult for most people throughout history. We could dismiss the view that our own lives are increasingly stressful as trendy self-pity. Yet the social and personal cost of stress is great.

What causes stress?

In simple terms, when we are threatened or in danger, our bodies produce chemicals which prepare us to put up a fight or run away—the so-called fight or flight reaction.

When the "threat" is an irate customer, a pile of files or a whining child, neither fight nor flight is usually appropriate. So we experience the effect of these chemicals but not the relief of responding

to them. What's more, we can learn to feel stress just by thinking about stressful situations.

Triggers of stress in our twentieth century, western lifestyle are many, but include:

Busy-ness.

By the age of four, today's child is likely to be in constant motion, from kindergarten to kindy gym, from music lessons to childcare. By the end of primary school, home might well be little more than a place to sleep. The pace is set for adult life.

Christians are certainly not immune from busy-ness, as they try to fit church commitments, bible study and prayer into their already full lives. Dreams of escaping to a monastic life are not uncommon! Most people realise that they are "too busy" but deciding what activities to cut back is not easy.

Technological speed.

If our activities were limited to those we could carry out within walking distance of home, most of us would have much quieter lives. Our cars allow us to travel long distances, in relative comfort, but contribute to our stress. Phones, fax machines, computers and email also add to the speed of life.

Information overload.

Most people in the past relied on word of mouth for their information. Much of it was

inaccurate, but they had time to integrate what they heard into what they already knew. Today we are bombarded with information. If we don't recognise that much of it is irrelevant or inaccurate, and learn to be selective, we can feel overloaded and guilty for not keeping up.

Since good news doesn't sell, we are exposed to a very slanted view of the world through the media. We can become depressed about situations which have no bearing on our own lives and which we can do nothing about.

False expectations.

Many people in the post-war generation grew up believing that, with work and determination, they could be anything, do anything and have anything they chose. Real life, while being better than most previous generations could have dreamed of, is frequently disappointing.

In contrast, members of the next generation often have a sense of hopelessness about the future. The threat of unemployment, global warming, social disintegration and a belief that life ends at death, all rob their efforts of any meaning. They feel as if they are going nowhere.

Social isolation.

We may be able to communicate instantly with almost anyone in the world, but we often have little time to spend with people. Many of our interactions, even with those closest to us, stay at

a superficial level. Our mobility prevents us from getting to know our neighbours. As a result, when we're feeling stressed, we have few people to support us, and those who do often feel overloaded themselves.

The burden of possessions.

Compared to most of the world's people, we are materially blessed. However, every purchase we make adds an extra demand on our time to maintain it. We must also find somewhere to keep it. The more expensive the item, the more anxious we will be about it being stolen or broken.

The shrinking of time.

The smallest period of time mentioned in the bible is an hour. Now we speak blithely about athletes taking 2/100ths of a second off a record. People in the past viewed time as something which was created as they lived. It could not be "gained" or "wasted".

In contrast, we see time as something with a reality of its own, already subdivided into milliseconds and waiting for us to fill it. This puts us under constant pressure to keep up with the clock. The quest for increased productivity has added to this pressure.

Change.

Our nervous system constantly monitors the world around us. However, our brain only stays

consciously alert to things which are changing. For instance, we don't notice how our clothes feel on our skin most of the time.

We are also unable to focus our attention on more than one thing at once. In order to stay alert to two or more things, we have to switch our attention back and forth. If we live in an environment which is noisy and fast-moving, we place great demands on our nervous system and brain. It is not surprising that we become jumpy, forgetful and have difficulty concentrating.

Constant change was a key feature of the twentieth century, and in the twenty-first century change has happened even more rapidly.

Some changes are superficial. Others have been more profound. The improved status of women, new ways of raising children, altered attitudes to authority and concern about the environment have had a deep effect on how we live and relate to each other. The internet and mobile phones have changed our lives in countless ways. For many, the lack of certainty created by change is stressful.

Stressed Christians

It is difficult in our society to avoid all these pressures (and there are no doubt others). Yet Christians often add another stress of their own—guilt about feeling stressed! They feel that as Christians, they should be living peaceful, stress-

free lives. Otherwise, how will they be a living witness to Jesus?

It is true that if we deal with stress by using drugs or alcohol, or by abusing our family, we will not be much of an advertisement to others. Nor are we likely to be believed if we pretend to ourselves and others that we don't experience the same pressures as other people.

The answer is not to make a virtue of being stressed. Paul only "boasted" about his sufferings in order to make a point. (See 2 Corinthians 11:16-30). What we really need is to recognise the stresses in our lives and find constructive, godly ways to deal with them.

Dealing with stress

Relaxation techniques, attention to diet and exercise, time-management strategies, voluntary simplicity and community building are all valid and useful ways of reducing the stress in our lives. However, as Christians we must also deal with two underlying issues; fear and lack of focus.

Fear

So much of our busy-ness and sense of overload is due to fear—fear of failure, fear of being rejected, fear of loss, fear of illness and death, fear of losing control. Yet often we don't even recognise the fears that drive us.

Both Christians and non-Christians may be driven by a subconscious fear of God. In the non-

Christian this is understandable and even a positive thing. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31) if we haven't put our trust in him.

In the Christian it can only be due to an inadequate grasp of what salvation means. God may call us to be busy for him, but busy-ness can easily become our own attempt to win God's favour, if we don't understand that we are totally forgiven and accepted already. Jesus has completed that task, with nothing for us to add.

The key to overcoming all these fears is to know what scripture says about them—really know, with our hearts as well as our heads. We can only do this by reading the bible regularly and prayerfully. Then we need to put what we have read into practice, as a conscious act of will. "God is my salvation, I WILL trust and WILL NOT be afraid." (my emphasis).

Freedom from fear is not something we are likely to achieve in an instant. Each time we become fearful again, we need to recognise it, ask for forgiveness and grace, then begin afresh. Other Christians can be an invaluable and God-given source of encouragement in this.

Focus

Lack of focus in our lives results in us being pulled this way and that by competing demands and desires. We may have many different goals, all of them apparently good, but often quite

contradictory. For instance, "I must spend more time with my family", and "I must work as hard as I can to get the promotion I deserve." As a result, we begin to feel fragmented.

Christians are not immune from this. Often we simply add a few spiritual goals to the rest, rather than refocusing our lives.

Fear and lack of focus are obviously related. If I fear something (or someone), one of my goals will be to avoid or overcome the thing I fear. If I have many fears, I will have many different goals, and my mental, physical and emotional energies will be scattered in all directions.

Jesus

Jesus had only one focus in life; the kingdom of God, for the glory of God. He called his followers to be equally single-minded. "Seek first his (God's) kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (i.e. material needs) will be given you as well." (Matthew 6.33).

"Yes, but Jesus didn't have a job, or mortgage, or a family to worry about. He could afford to be single minded," we might reply. I don't think Jesus was calling us to abandon these things (though sometimes he does). Rather, we are to look at them all in the light of the kingdom of God.

The work we do is to contribute to building God's kingdom, whether we preach sermons, design cars or wash dishes. Anything we do which

makes the world a better place, or nurtures our neighbour, is kingdom work if we do it for God.

Our house is to be a part of God's kingdom, received with thanks, used for his service and even given up if that is what he asks of us. When we see our home as a place given to us by God, a place where he is welcomed, hospitality becomes a matter of sharing what we have received, for his sake.

Our children are to be raised for God's kingdom, not by brow-beating them, but by drawing them into it by gracious word and example. If they choose to go another way, our focus is still to be God's kingdom.

Our hobbies, our clothes, our friendships, our money, our possessions, our relationship with our in-laws, our health—all are to be seen in the light of God's kingdom.

When we look at Jesus' life, as described in the gospels, we can see the effects of being focused. Jesus had compassion on the crowds who followed him about and healed many who were sick. Yet at times he would walk away from them, in order to pray or teach his disciples. He was not driven by a need to be popular, or to cure all the world's ills.

Jesus did not try to do everything himself. He taught his disciples, then sent them out in pairs to teach and heal. He shared his concerns with them. He entrusted the future church to them. He was

not driven by the need to keep power to himself or to appear super-human.

Jesus had no hesitation in openly criticising or correcting those who were straying from the truth. He continued his ministry despite the growing opposition of the authorities. Fear of man did not come between him and his goal of bringing about the kingdom of God.

In prayer, Jesus maintained the same focus. "Father, may your name be hallowed, may your kingdom come, may your will be done," (Matthew 6:9). The needs of the day, including our daily bread, followed on from this, not as though they were trivial, but placed in their true context. Through prayer, Jesus received the strength and direction he needed to stay focused.

Jesus certainly didn't live a quiet, stress-free life. He experienced tiredness, grief, pressure from the crowds, misunderstanding from his disciples, harassment from the religious authorities and ultimately betrayal, torture and death. Yet always he seemed to be in control, steady in his purpose and sure of where he was going. His resurrection is our assurance that in the end he reached his goal.

Being focused in this way, while it may seem difficult at first sight, (and impossible without the help of the Holy Spirit), would surely simplify our lives and overcome the fragmentation we so often experience. We would carry only one burden instead of many.

Perhaps that is what Jesus meant when he said "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11.28-30.)

6. JESUS AND FREEDOM

One of the things that immediately stands out as one reads the gospel accounts of Jesus' life is how liberated he seemed compared to other people.

Here was a man who was unfazed by the criticism and opposition of his enemies, the questioning and advice of his friends, or the social mores and taboos of his time. The things that so often keep us captive seemed to have no hold on him.

The Pharisees were highly respected, even feared, but Jesus tackled them head on. Rather than meekly answering their questions, he replied by questioning them. He was not afraid of their power to blacken his name, to question his authority, or even to have him arrested and killed.

Nor did he fear the censure, disappointment or disapproval of those closer to him. He could calmly walk away from his mother and brothers when they came to call him home. He called his best friend "Satan" when he recognised where Peter's seemingly well-intentioned advice was coming from.

In a world where women and children were regarded as little better than beggars and lepers, he welcomed them all. It is difficult for us to comprehend how shocking Jesus' friendships with women must have seemed to the Pharisees, and

even to his own disciples. (Look at the disciples' reaction when they find him talking with a woman at the well of Sychar). What other rabbi not only welcomed women, but allowed them to sit at his feet with his disciples?

The Pharisees despised and feared women. They went to great lengths to avoid coming into contact with them in public. Women were polluting. Women provoked lustful thoughts that could drag a man away from the purity which they so carefully cultivated. Jesus appeared to be free from such fears. He was well aware of the sort of lusts and temptations that men faced. But he didn't live in fear of such lusts. He was free to relate to women as fellow human beings.

Jesus never backed away from his words in response to criticism. He never got deflected from his purposes. He was free from the sort of fears and anxieties that leave us feeling bound and confused. He treated all with respect but was afraid of no-one. He was a completely free man.

Sometimes, of course, he was tired (Jn 4:6), exasperated (Mt 17:17), even distressed (Lk 12:50). He was not free from the normal trials of life. Nor was he free from temptation—far from it (Lk 4).

In the last days of his life he was physically bound and held captive. But even during his trial and execution, it was he, not his captors, who seemed most free. Pilate offered him freedom, and Jesus calmly reminded Pilate where his power

to hold or free him really came from. At his crucifixion, Jesus freed his persecutors from the burden of guilt by forgiving them.

Even death could not rob Jesus of his liberty. "But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him." (Acts 2:24) The resurrection is the ultimate shattering of that which keeps us most bound, the fear of death.

We must be careful in what lessons we draw from Jesus' life. He was, after all, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. But he was also Son of Man, truly one of us, and surely we can learn much about what a human life is meant to look like by studying Jesus' life. If "the Son shall set us free", we ought at least to consider how he modelled for us the sort of freedom he intended us to have.

PART 3 DEATH

7. **WAITING FOR THE LIGHTS**

A white hearse was in front of me at the traffic lights. It was big and shiny and mostly glass, which made it easy to see that it was empty apart from the driver and his passenger. I pondered where it might be going, and what might be the significance of the change from black hearses to showy white ones.

On the radio was a rather melancholy piece from the opera Boris Glazunov. Boris Kristof was singing the part of Boris, who was dying, apparently. It was taking him a long time to die, but the piece was clearly full of emotion, even though I couldn't understand the lyrics.

The juxtaposition of the hearse and the song seemed odd, even bizarre in such a mundane situation. As Boris sobbed his last few breaths, cars and trucks continued to pass the intersection, the lady in the park continued to walk her dog, and the driver in the car next to me beat time with his fingers to some livelier tune.

And then suddenly, just for a few seconds, reality seemed to go into reverse, like seeing the negative of a photo. The hearse and the death song were the true reality, and the rest of us, impatiently waiting to get to wherever we were going, seemed to be the bizarre element. Our lives, full of striving to get from here to there,

were just part of a brief melodrama, a pretence that we could avoid death by keeping busy. We would all be passengers in the hearse one day.

I was reminded of what I had been reading recently in Ecclesiastes. Some people say Ecclesiastes is a 'difficult' book. I think it's a very realistic book which tells it like it is. Without bringing God into the picture, life is ultimately meaningless. While there is much to enjoy, success and happiness seem unfairly distributed, and death is the unavoidable fate of everyone.

Even with God in the picture, life can sometimes seem absurd. But at least we have the reassurance that Someone, somewhere, knows what it's all about, and death is not necessarily the futile end.

8. LIFE IS UNPREDICTABLE

Early morning, 11 September 2001: a man is about to go to a company training seminar at the World Trade Center in New York, when the phone rings. It's his boss, telling him that his permission to attend the seminar is cancelled because there's too much work backed up in the office.

The man mutters a few choice words about this sudden change of plans. But instead of travelling to the World Trade Center, he reluctantly goes to work in the office a few blocks away. Today, he is alive. His colleagues who attended the seminar died.

Stories like this abounded in the weeks after 11 September. They underline the unpredictability of life. Human beings have the knowledge to change the course of rivers, travel into space and manipulate the genetic material of plants and animals. But none of us knows with any certainty what will happen to us in five minutes time. And we all long for some sort of certainty.

Plying the gods

This desire to overcome the uncertainty and unpredictability in life has been the motivation behind a great deal of religious activity throughout history. If the future is in the hands of the gods,

then the gods must be persuaded to make a future favourable to their followers, or at least be manipulated into revealing the future in advance, so that people can be prepared.

For some, the gods are divine beings, each with their own prescribed method of being won over. This one likes long prayers and chants. That one prefers a sacrifice of some sort. Those who have the ear of the gods and pass on their messages are revered as prophets and seers.

Others prefer to talk about more impersonal concepts like "luck" or "fate" or "karma". But the desire to predict and manipulate the future is the same.

There is a huge interest in our own society in astrology and fortune telling. The whimsical half-page guide to "your stars", once tucked away near the back of women's magazines, has become three or four full pages of astrological predictions, clairvoyant "advice" and tarot card readings. Nostradamus could hardly have predicted his own popularity in the twenty-first century.

Playing the odds

Those who scorn such predictions as nonsense are still careful to ensure that they have the best odds on the future. Feng shui is big business. So is the insurance industry. A surprisingly large number of people who take out insurance do so in the misguided belief that they are somehow reducing their risk of future disaster. ("It can't happen to

me, I'm insured.") Some insurance sellers encourage this belief, or even believe it themselves.

Lucky charms, such as the angels that appeared on sale everywhere not long ago, are commercially promoted. But many people have their own personal charms which they feel obliged to carry with them in order to be safe—a pen their father gave them, a coin they found on a special occasion, a picture of a loved one. They may not recognise them as "lucky charms", but they feel strangely insecure without them.

Superstition is everywhere. While most people laugh off traditional superstitions, such as not walking under ladders, individuals and groups often have their own subtle superstitions. Things must be done in a certain way, certain places or situations must be avoided, in order to avert some unnamed calamity.

The belief that bad things happen in threes is also widespread, perpetuated by the fact that people looking for the third mishap will sooner or later be rewarded in their search.

Another popular way of trying to manipulate and ensure a better future is through gambling. Whether it involves buying a scratchie on the weekend or trading futures on the stock exchange, gambling holds out the hope that luck will be on our side and bless us with the means to buy future happiness. Each year, Australians spend nearly twenty billion dollars on gambling.

(This figure excludes raffles, sweepstakes and the like, as well as stock-market losses.)

Greed adds its appeal to that of luck when it comes to gambling, and sadly, the gambling industry is aided by governments in their promotion of this form of "entertainment".

Christian fatalism

Some Christians have their own, unscriptural, ways of dealing with "fate". There are those who become fatalistic, accepting whatever comes as "the will of God" or "the cross I have to bear". Out of a misguided fear of offending God, they never question what is happening to them, or try to bring about change. They confuse trust with resignation.

Omen hunters, on the other hand, look for "signs from God" in every little event and turn of their day. Without the right sign, they become unable to move forwards, fearful of getting it wrong.

Sometimes, of course, God does direct us by indicating that a particular event is significant. But most of the time he expects us to be directed by his word in scripture, by the Holy Spirit working through our minds and hearts, and by common sense.

Others want God to reveal the future to them by laying out some sort of detailed life plan for them. Both omen hunters and life planners fail to see that, as Christians, they are called to walk in

faith and trust. God reveals to us what we need to know and promises to be there with us in the unknown future. The fear that we may somehow lose God's love and protection, by misjudging his plans for us, goes against the whole thrust of his word.

Our certain future

Some things in this world are (almost) inevitable. Heavy objects fall towards the earth, paper burns in a flame. Other things are open to human influence. We can make things happen, by our own efforts.

Still other events are predictable in a mathematical sense. If you toss a coin a hundred times, it's likely to come up heads half the time. Creation obeys the laws of chance in the same way that it obeys the laws of gravity and thermodynamics, as part of the way God intended it to be. Such "predictions" are morally neutral.

However, any attempt to predict or influence the future through "luck", "fate" or some other power is idolatry. As Christians we believe that it is God who determines and controls the future. Through prayer we can express our hopes and desires, and even, by God's grace, play a part in influencing the future. But God cannot be manipulated by our prayers or actions. There is no formula for hitting the jackpot of God's generosity, no technique for persuading him to reveal tomorrow's events.

Unlike the prophets of other gods, God's prophets are not forecasters. They come to warn people of what will happen if they don't change their ways. Although the Bible does contain prophecies about the future, they aren't given in a way that would be useful to an insider trader. They are there to warn the unrepentant sinner and reassure God's people that, in the end, no matter how bad things seem, God is in control.

But if God is in control, does that mean that God decided who would be in the World Trade Center when it collapsed? Yes, in the sense that he knew who would be inside, and clearly did not prevent them from being there. No, in the sense that they each decided of their own free will to be there that morning, and so became victims of their own and other people's decisions.

The interplay of God's will, our choices and the impartial, God-created, rules of chance are a mystery which we do not understand.

What we *do* understand is that God doesn't play games with us. He doesn't indifferently toss events and people's lives about in some cosmic roulette wheel. He loves us passionately and is vitally involved in everything that happens to us.

Nothing happens which is outside God's knowledge and purpose. When Jesus died on the cross, it was not an unlucky end to a short life, but the fulfillment of an eternal plan to bring all creation back to God.

The life we have through Christ is part of that plan. Our human life is unpredictable and uncertain, but our future in Christ is already laid out for us in God's word, certain and sublime.

9. FREE FROM THE FEAR OF DEATH

How does the fear of death manifest itself?

As I've been studying Romans recently, I've been struck by the way that Paul talks about both sin and death as powers which oppose God's reign in human lives. They are almost personified. Or perhaps it would be better to say that in Romans they play the role that Satan plays elsewhere in the New Testament.

Death in Romans is far more than an event at the end of life. It pervades the whole of life. Without Christ, we are dead in our sins. Not in future, but now. Death rules us. (Romans 5:14, 5:17, 8:6, 8:10 etc). To have faith in Christ is to move from death to life, not in some afterlife, but now.

But how does death affect us? Obviously, there is the fear of dying itself. The more anxious we are about dying, the more we try to protect ourselves from it. Perhaps it is significant that in a society where God and the gospel have been largely rejected, we have become highly skilled at preserving and extending life. Our children are protected so thoroughly from all possible danger that they barely have opportunity to test and develop their own skills. We crave adventure, but without risk.

The healthy lifestyle has become the new religion, and transgressions against the rules laid down by the health gurus cause many people to feel as much guilt as acts of adultery and stealing did to previous generations. (It's interesting to note that people fail to live up to these new commandments just as often as their forbears did to the old ones.)

But fear of death also pervades life in other ways. Death has other meanings for us beside the end of respiration and circulation, and each of these gives rise to fears which limit our lives and freedom.

Death means powerlessness.

The dead have no power to act, to bring about change, or to control events. They might continue to have an influence on the living through what they have said, done or written while alive, but they have no power to speak beyond the grave. Apart from some limited legal provisions, the living are under no obligation to honor the choices or wishes of the dead.

This fear of powerlessness extends into everyday life. Think about what it would mean to be alive but unable to speak or to act. Many would describe such a state as a "living death". We shudder at the thought of being paralysed, demented or impotent. And while we may not consciously think about such things very often, they affect the way we choose to live.

We work hard to guard and protect what powers we have. Most people fight fiercely against anyone who tries to take control away from them. We avoid taking risks that might result in us losing control over our lives or our surroundings.

Our fear of powerlessness manifests itself in our dislike of authority. We resist submitting any part of our lives to another's control, even voluntarily, even if their authority is valid.

Death also means separation.

The dead are parted from the people and places and objects that they loved. Even for those who believe in an afterlife in which the dead are reunited with others, there is a time of separation. So our fear of death feeds our fear of isolation and loneliness.

One of the most powerful sanctions any society possesses to control its members is the threat of expulsion and exclusion. To be excluded is to be as good as dead. Think of how in some societies, a son or daughter who dishonours their family is turned out of the home and shunned. The family will speak of the person, if at all, as if they are dead. In Christian societies in the past, to be excommunicated was a similarly dreadful prospect.

Fear of isolation drives many people to do and say whatever is necessary to remain in community and relationship with others, no matter how far that may be from their own desires and beliefs.

Does this contradict what I said earlier about people resisting those who seek to control them? Not really. One of the techniques commonly used by controlling personalities against those they seek to control is to threaten them with separation or isolation, if they don't do what is expected of them.

The playground bully who threatens to exclude a child from the group if they don't play the game his way, the controlling boyfriend who threatens to leave if his girlfriend doesn't agree to have sex with him, the manipulative wife who withdraws and sulks when her husband won't agree to her demands, and the dictator who draws a whole nation into his mad plans by publicly shaming and excluding those who disagree—all these know the power of the fear of exclusion to control people's behaviour. To be alone is to be living as if dead to others.

Death means annihilation.

Put aside for a moment the reality of God and the promise of eternal life, and try to remember how you felt the first time you realised that one day you too would die, just like everyone else. For most people that moment brings a shiver of horror mixed with incomprehension. To think is to be, if I may paraphrase Descartes. How can we think about 'not being', about non-existence? The person most aware of our existence is surely ourselves. We know our existence from the inside,

as it were. If we no longer exist, then the person who is most intimately aware of who we are also no longer exists. There is no-one to experience our being, either from inside or out. No-one will know us, for ever.

Those who love us will remember us for a while, of course, perhaps for the rest of their lives. But they will only remember what is past. We will not add anything to their experience of the present. If we have done things which made us famous or notorious, we will be remembered by many people, but again, only for what we have been, not for who we are now. And we will know nothing of what they think of us, or what they do with what we did. At death (if there is no after-life), all that we will ever be or accomplish or experience will be complete, and nothing can be added to it.

This fear of annihilation drives many of us to achieve all that we can before death overtakes us. It's common for those who reach the age of forty or so to start thinking about how short life really is, and how soon death will come. The realisation of how little time they have left to accomplish all the things they once dreamed of doing produces a sense of panic in some people, and they experience a 'mid-life crisis'.

For some this is a constructive time, as they go on to develop dormant talents and nurture flagging relationships. Others go overboard and cast off everything and everyone in an attempt to

make a fresh start. Some try to prove that they can flout death, whether it's by climbing mountains or through cosmetic surgery.

But long before forty, most people have an underlying awareness and fear of the annihilation that death will bring. While it may inspire some to accomplish all they can, it cripples others.

On the one hand there are those who constantly seek to confirm and intensify their existence through whatever experiences they can—thrill seekers, some drug users, narcissists. On the other hand are the timid, those who are afraid to take any risks at all. They coddle their precious existence. The fear of annihilation is kept at bay by using anything that will bring comfort or forgetfulness.

Those who live in fear are not free. The fear that death arouses in us keep us from living in freedom. Whenever our choices and actions are influenced by fear, it becomes impossible for us to make a free choice, to act freely, from the heart. We become slaves to our fears and those who can manipulate us through our fears.

If Christ sets us free from the fear of death (Heb. 2.15), then it must be that he sets us free from all the other fears that death brings with it. And so he does. Jesus offers us a life that is free from the fear of powerlessness and separation and annihilation.

No matter what our circumstances, we know that in him we have life that is eternal, life lived in

the power of the Holy Spirit, life in close and unbreakable fellowship with his Father.

As Paul writes in Romans 8:38, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." To be convinced of this is to overcome the fear of death and live in freedom.

10. DEATH IS DEFEATED

Death is always ugly, no matter how or when it comes. As a young hospital doctor one of my tasks was to examine patients who had recently died, in order to confirm their death. It was usually quite evident that the person was dead, even before I felt for a pulse and listened for breathing. Death robs the body of colour and personality and leaves it waxy and inert.

In the course of my work I saw bodies of people who had begun the day with no expectation of dying, and others who had longed for death. I saw young bodies and bodies wizened with age, shrivelled by cancer, bloated by disease. I saw corpses laid out neatly in hospital beds and corpses strapped hastily to ambulance stretchers. I never saw a beautiful corpse.

Death is always cruel. Sometimes people speak of death as if it were a friend, bringing relief from suffering. But death often only ends the suffering that the process of dying began. Death takes a warm, living being and leaves it with the cold, peaceful stillness of a stone or a block of wood. Then it initiates a new wave of suffering in those who grieve.

Death is always tragic. We usually think of the death of a child as the most tragic of events, since it robs the world and the individual of all the

potential that a young life held. Yet I would say the longer a person has lived, the more tragic their death. The passing of an elderly person brings the loss of the knowledge, wisdom, memories and experience acquired over a lifetime, often at the cost of immense struggles and pain.

Even if the deceased person has taught others and written books, only a fraction of their real life's work remains behind when they go. The rest perishes with them, sometimes even before their body finally gives in to death. And while the loss of a child is deeply mourned by their immediate family, the death of an older person often leaves an unfillable void in the lives of countless friends, relatives and associates.

Death is unnatural. It was never meant to be. Dylan Thomas was right when he said we should "rage, rage against the dying of the light." In our western society we try to pretend that death doesn't exist, until it happens. Then we try to pretend that it's all very natural and a blessing really. It's not. Death is our enemy.

Yet death is a defeated enemy. One man has done what no other could do—walked into death's jaws and left death behind him with its teeth broken. Death's greatest, most prized victim, the son of God himself, has rendered death powerless to hold its prey. As one of my favourite songs says, "Death could not hold him down, for he is risen!".

Christ has destroyed the sting of death. Death is still ugly, cruel, tragic and unnatural, but it is no longer final. The fear of death need no longer rule our lives. What death destroys, Christ will restore. What death steals, Christ will redeem.