

The Ensign

of the Christian Israelite Church

‘And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.’ Isaiah 11:12

Comfort in Grief

by Trudy Adams

The Old War

The opposition between life and death is one of the main themes of the Bible. God describes himself as the ‘God of the living’ (Mark 12:27), while Satan or the devil is described as having the ‘power of death’ (Hebrews 2:14). God initially designed us to be healthy, happy and immortal, but after Adam and Eve disobeyed him, sin and evil came into the world and humanity became subject to death (Genesis 3). As Satan gains his power from death, he proactively tempts and drives us towards sin so that we become more and more subject to death (1 John 3:8). Death, however, was never part of God’s plan. Everything God instructs us to do is to bring us life, but he does allow us to choose an alternative path if we wish to. Where God offers us healing and a cure (Jeremiah 33:6), the devil offers us disease and sickness. Where God offers us joy and an abundant life, Satan ‘comes to steal, and to kill, and to destroy’ (John 10:10). Where God offers us blessings if we do his will, Satan makes way for curses when he tempts us to sin (Deuteronomy 28). The devil tries to divert us from anything God instructs us to do as he knows that such things bring long life and blessings. The story hasn’t changed in thousands of years: God still desires us to have life, and life is still at war with death.

Hope After Death

Physical death is a separation. It parts us from our loved ones, but it is also a separation of the spirit from the body:

‘Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.’
Ecclesiastes 12:7.

While death is not God’s plan for us, and the Christian Israelite Church is focused on celebrating and pursuing life, death is an unhappy reality in this fallen and corrupt world. As we have seen, sin can quicken our journey towards death, whilst living righteously and within God’s will can prolong our life. (Not that sin, whether ours or our ancestors’, is always a cause of ailments, as per the story of the blind man in John 9:1-3.) But until Jesus Christ returns, we remain subject to death one way or another and, with it, the grief of being separated from loved ones.

Thankfully, God provides us with hope of life after death through soul salvation (Psalm 49:15) and the promise of a resurrection when Jesus Christ returns (Acts 24:15). For those who die in the faith of Jesus Christ, we can be assured that they are resting in peace and enjoying the presence of God. They are freed from all worries and torments. Jesus’ victory over death means there is no longer any need for Christians to fear death:

‘The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.’
1 Thessalonians 4:16.

For those who die without any belief in God or Jesus Christ, Christian Israelites believe they will still be raised at the final resurrection (Acts 24:15), and that in the end, ‘at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is our Lord’ (Philippians 2:10-11). We know that God will ‘not leave my soul in hell’ (Psalm 16:10). We will be reunited with our departed loved ones one way or another. The promise is not designed to minimise our grief, but to give us hope that death does not and never will have the final victory over us. (See *What Christian Israelites Believe About What Happens After Death and at the Resurrections* for more information about hope after death.)

Grief in the Bible

It is good to be strengthened by the assurance of salvation after death and to know that our loved ones are safe and happy in heaven, but for those who remain there is the reality of a life without the deceased. Not only are they missed, but in some cases there is the added complications of no longer sharing responsibility with another person, or increased financial pressures, or not being able to fulfil plans that had been made for the future. It is not just the deceased person that is grieved, but the life that was and could have been enjoyed with them.

God tells us through Solomon that there is a ‘time to weep’ (Ecclesiastes 3:4), indicating that grief is a natural and expected response to death. The Bible is full of examples of men and women openly displaying their grief through shaving their heads, and/or wearing sackcloth and ashes, as was the case for the Jews at the time of Esther when they heard they were to be destroyed (Esther 7:3). The book of Job is a thorough exploration of the grief Job felt when he lost almost all that he had, causing him to lament, ‘let the day perish

wherein I was born’ (3:3). Abraham mourned and wept for his wife Sarah (Genesis 23:2), and the children of Israel wept for thirty days when Moses died (Deuteronomy 34:8). David was so grieved over the death of his son Absalom that even his people turned to mourning (2 Samuel 19:1-4). Perhaps it was Absalom he was thinking of when he wrote:

‘Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am in trouble: mine eye is consumed with grief, yea, my soul and my belly. For my life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing.’ Psalm 31:9-10.

When Jesus came to help his friend Lazarus only to discover him dead, it was the grief of Lazarus’ sister Mary and other Jews that caused Jesus to ‘groan in the spirit’ and to feel ‘troubled’. Jesus himself wept when he saw Lazarus’s body. Even though he knew he would momentarily raise him from the dead, Jesus still felt the pain and injustice of death in that moment and its impact on others (see John 11:32-35). Isaiah spoke of Jesus Christ as ‘a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief’, who has ‘borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows’ (53:3-4). Grief was a natural emotion for Jesus and, because he experienced it so deeply, he can easily empathise with our experiences and help us to bear it.

Grief and Guilt

A common battle of the mind following grief is that of guilt – a battle that the devil wages by plaguing our minds with thoughts of ‘what ifs’ and ‘if onlys’. It’s important that we don’t try and take responsibility for things that are out of our control, that we cannot fix or change, or which were the results of another person’s actions. Usually we do the best we can in any given situation. If our best doesn’t give us the outcome we had hoped for, that doesn’t mean that we have failed or that the end result is our fault. Even if we deliberately commit a malicious act against another person or make an imprudent decision that places another in harm’s way, even to death, we can still find peace if we confess our sins

(1 John 1:9). God is ‘merciful and gracious’ (Psalm 103:8) and will wash us clean from all our iniquities (Psalm 51:2). Punishing ourselves when we are grieving only compounds the feelings of despair, when we have every right to access the peace and comfort that our advocate Jesus Christ offers (1 John 2:1; John 14:27). Whether we are guilty or simply perceive ourselves as such, Paul reminds us that ‘there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus’ (Romans 8:1). Entertaining regretful thoughts gives place to the devil, but being ‘spiritually minded [i.e. focused on what God’s word says is true] is life and peace’ (Romans 8:6).

Fear of Death

Another problem that can accompany grief is fear. It is common for people who have experienced a loss to develop a fear of death, whether that be their own death or that of another loved one. We must remember that God ‘hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind’ (2 Timothy 1:7). We can ‘lie down and sleep in peace’ because God ‘only makest [us to] dwell in safety’ (Psalm 4:8). Jesus encourages us not to fear the future at all (Matthew 6:25-34). Any fearful thoughts we have about the future or otherwise are not from God, and anything not from God is of the devil, who is a liar (John 8:44). We must cleave to the truth that God gives us a hope-filled future (Jeremiah 29:11) and an abundant life (John 10:10). Even if the worse were to happen, we can remind ourselves that death means returning to God’s presence and living free of worry and torment – not something to be feared:

‘For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.’ 2 Corinthians 5:1.

Whilst we are alive, God offers those that love him protection from early death. Jesus gave his disciples power – power that extends to all

Christians – to cast out demons and heal ‘all manner of sickness and all manner of disease’ (Matthew 10:1). James noted that ‘the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up’ (5:15). God promised the Israelites that he would bring them health, adding that ‘I will cure them, and will reveal unto them the abundance of peace and truth’ (Jeremiah 33:6). Psalm 91 is full of promises of protection from harm and of a long life for those who love God:

‘Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee ... There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways ... With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation.’ vs 5-7, 10-11, 16.

When afflicted with illness, we certainly should not give into death but pursue healing and deliverance, being assured that God is prepared to ‘take sickness away from the midst of thee’ (Exodus 23:25). We may need to engage in spiritual warfare and ensure that neither sin nor the devil have place in our lives (Ephesians 6:12), through unforgiveness or otherwise. But healing is a promise that remains as real for us as it was for those who were healed by Jesus Christ himself. His power is ever present and available, for he says, ‘whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?’ (John 11:26).

The Bible repeatedly assures us that God wants us to have life (e.g. John 10:28, Deuteronomy 30:19), while the grave is rebuked. Isaiah highlights that it is the living who bring God glory:

‘For the grave cannot praise thee, death cannot celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth. The living, the living, he shall praise thee, as I do this day.’ 38:18-19.

David added to this idea when he wrote, ‘I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord’ (Psalm 118:17), and ‘in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?’ (Psalm 6:5). It is when we are alive – the way God created us to be – that we most honour God. David again reiterates this idea in Psalm 30:

‘O Lord my God, I cried unto thee, and thou hast healed me. O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from the grave: thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit ... What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Shall the dust praise thee? shall it declare thy truth? Hear, O Lord, and have mercy upon me: Lord, be thou my helper.’ vs 2-3; 9-10.

Of course, there are some who are not healed, or who are taken far too soon through accidents, or the deliberate, malicious actions of others. We may never understand why, and trying to rationalise it can sometimes compromise our mental and emotional well-being. As Deuteronomy 29:29 says, ‘The secret things belong unto the Lord our God’. There are some things we are not meant to know or that are simply a result of living in a world with sin and evil. What we do know is that God does not take pleasure in death or cause it.

Blaming God

It is common for anger and blame to accompany grief as we try to make sense of what often feels like a senseless loss. In their anger, many people blame God when someone they love dies.

In Psalm 22, King David lamented to God in despair (the psalm overall foreshadowing

Jesus’ despair on the cross, where he too felt abandoned by God):

‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the day time, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent.’ vs. 1-2.

However, within the same psalm David remembers that God is faithful, and determines to praise him:

‘For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard. My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation.’ vs 24-25.

Again, we are reminded that death is not part of God’s character or will. If anyone is to be blamed, it’s the one who brought death into the world – Satan. God actually so hates death that it is described as his enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). An enemy is someone or something that actively seeks to harm another, or who is strongly opposed to another’s views. By calling death an enemy, Paul is showing us just how strongly God opposes it. God himself is living (Psalm 42:2), and he wants us to be living too. We were not designed for a world with death in it, and that is why death is so painful.

While we may come to understand that God does not desire death, the question that may still follow is that if he is all powerful and all loving, why did he *allow* someone to get sick, or die in an accident, or be harmed unto death? Unfortunately, we must return to the fact that we live in a world corrupted by sin and evil:

‘Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.’ Romans 5:12.

We must also remember that we have free-will, and with it make many choices a day. Some of those choices may seem inconsequential, such as what we eat for breakfast, but each and every choice leads to either life or death. God encourages us to 'choose life' (Deuteronomy 30:19) but does not directly interfere with our choices out of respect for our autonomy. While mercy is always available for those who ask for it (Hebrews 4:16), ultimately we still face the consequences of our choices. Sometimes we can even be subject to the consequences of our ancestors' choices (Numbers 14:18), unless we seek to break generational curses with the help of Jesus Christ.

Often people are the victim of other, living people's choices though, or simply that of an accident. We can't forget that God and Satan are still at war, with Satan and his evil spirits actively working to trap us unto death – sometimes directly, sometimes through other people. Sickness and death can be a sign of a spiritual warfare, but we don't always know why death comes, or why God didn't step in to prevent it. The more senseless the loss, the more difficult it can be to make peace with it. The problem is that when we are grieved, traumatised and in despair, it is very easy for the devil to plant thoughts in our minds against God, thoughts of blame, anger, doubt and unbelief. Satan tried this very tactic on Job, telling God that Job would curse God if he lost all of his blessings. Job then proceeded to lose his children, livelihood and health, yet 'in all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly' (Job 1:22). His wife encouraged him to curse God just as Satan had hoped he would, but Job refused (Job 2:9-10). Like Job and David, it's important that even in our despair we keep our mind focused on the goodness of God and cast down thoughts that rise up against him (2 Corinthians 10:5). If we don't, the devil can easily tempt us to abandon our faith and lead us into depression, in which case he wins. Instead of walking into such traps, we need to remember it was God who gave his son to overcome death and bring us eternal life (John 3:16).

Anger Towards the Deceased

Like blaming God, fear, and guilt, anger towards our departed loved ones can prevent us from receiving comfort amidst our grief. Perhaps they made an unwise decision that led to their death, or died as a result of self-harm, or left behind various problems for the living to deal with on their behalf. Perhaps they hurt a lot of people before they died and never made amends or apologised. Perhaps those who have suffered the loss feel angry due to a sense of abandonment and rejection, as if the deceased made the decision to leave.

Anger itself is not a sin, but it can lead to unforgiveness, which is. Paul tells us to forgive one another – whether dead or alive – as Christ forgave us (Colossians 3:13). Doing so prevents grief from being prolonged, and bitterness and resentment from taking root in our hearts. With God's help, we can come to a place of peace free of the torment of unforgiveness. (For more about the process of forgiveness, see the article *Understanding Forgiveness*.)

Regardless of what the deceased did or didn't do, God will not leave us bereft or unjustified. It is he who brings us comfort when we need it most, and who offers to be our strength.

The Comfort of God

In the story of Lazarus's death, we saw that Jesus Christ was saddened by the grief of those around him. His father is described as the 'God of all comfort' (2 Corinthians 1:3). Both feel our pain and are there to strengthen us in our grief:

'The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.'
Psalm 34:18.

'My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.'
Psalm 73:26.

God is aware of every tear that we shed:

‘Put thou my tears into thy bottle:
are they not in thy book?’ Psalm
56:8.

He promises to be a ‘father to the fatherless’ and a protector of the widow (Psalm 68:5). Those who mourn are ensured the blessing of comfort (Matthew 5:4). Jesus Christ himself promised that, while it was time for him to return to his Father, he would not leave us comfortless, but that the Father would send a Comforter (the Holy Ghost) (John 14:26). While Jesus as a man could only minister to those he met face to face, the Holy Ghost is available to all of us at all times, especially in our darkest hours.

With the help of the Holy Ghost, God promises that eventually, joy will follow grief:

‘Sorrow is turned into joy before
him.’ Job 41:22.

‘Weeping may endure for a night,
but joy cometh in the morning.’
Psalm 30:5.

God offers us ‘beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness’ (Isaiah 61:3). This doesn’t mean that we forget those who have died or must rush ourselves to feel better when we simply don’t, but that with God’s help, we can have hope for a happier future (Jeremiah 29:11). Where someone may have died unjustly, we can rely on God to take care of us and to bring something good from the situation (Romans 8:28). He also promises to exact justice and enact vengeance if needed and if we trust in him (Romans 12:19). For those who follow God, we can be sure that he will take care of our every need. He meets us with kindness and support both directly and through other people. When we are in need of comfort, we need only ask him for the Comforter: ‘How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?’ (Luke 11:13).

Sometimes we may fear grief itself, that is, of never recovering from it. The more we are

able to trust in God’s word, the more we can rest in his comfort so that even when those closest to us approach or succumb to death, we find ourselves ‘troubled on every side, yet not distressed ... perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed’ (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). Such peace comes when we steadfastly believe that God will take care of us and supply our every need (Philippians 4:19). We only need to cast our care onto him, knowing that he cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). God will never leave us nor forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6, 8). As he told us through Isaiah:

‘When thou passest through the
waters, I will be with thee; and
through the rivers, they shall not
overflow thee: when thou walkest
through the fire, thou shalt not be
burned; neither shall the flame
kindle upon thee.’ Isaiah 42:3.

Comforting Others

Paul tells us that it is through experiencing tribulation and receiving comfort from God that we are able to comfort others who grieve:

‘[God] comforteth us in all our
tribulation, that we may be able to
comfort them which are in any
trouble, by the comfort
wherewith we ourselves are
comforted of God.’
2 Corinthians 1:4.

Experiencing trials is like learning more languages to communicate with more people. Once we have adequately recovered from our grief with God’s help, we can then choose to provide hope and encouragement to others, often in ways we never could have done if it were not for our own lived experiences. While God provides his people with comfort directly, he often uses people to deliver comfort as well. In this vein, Paul encourages us all to ‘comfort yourselves together, and edify one another’ (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

We know that God protects those who have been grieved, particularly widows and orphans, but he instructs us to do so too:

‘Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.’ James 1:27.

Sometimes this means more than keeping them in our thoughts and prayers:

‘My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.’ 1 John 3:18.

It is by showing such love to others that we prove ourselves to be the disciples of Christ (John 13:35), remembering that ‘inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these brethren, ye have done it unto me’ (Matthew 25:40).

Jesus Christ’s Authority Over Death

One of the main ways Jesus Christ demonstrated that he was the Son of God with authority over the devil was when he raised people from the dead. This later culminated with his own resurrection, after which ‘death hath no more dominion over him’ (Romans 6:9). The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus tasted death for every man (2:9), that ‘through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil’ (2:14). Christian Israelites believe that Jesus’ victory over death paves the way for the physical body to be saved of death altogether at the end days, fulfilling God’s original design for us:

‘Our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.’ 2 Timothy 1:10.

Paul tells us that the ‘wages of sin is death’, but ‘the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Romans 6:23). In the end times and with the help of the Spirit, we

will overcome sin and thereby death altogether:

‘In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?’ 1 Corinthians 15:52-55.

John wrote that ‘death and hell’ shall be cast into a ‘lake of fire’ and destroyed (Revelation 20:14). He adds that when Jesus Christ returns, God will wipe away our tears, and ‘there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain’ (Revelation 21:4). Jesus Christ will ‘loose those that are appointed to death’ as if from prison (Psalm 102:20). God will recreate the world as he originally intended it to be: free of sin and evil, and therefore free of death.

‘I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction.’ Hosea 13:14.

In the meantime, it is our role to ‘fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man’ (Ecclesiastes 12:13), and ‘by patient continuance in well doing, seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life’ (Romans 2:7). We must resist death until our days are either fulfilled or Jesus Christ returns. In so doing, we are then able to confidently say:

‘I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is

laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.' 2 Timothy 4:6-8.