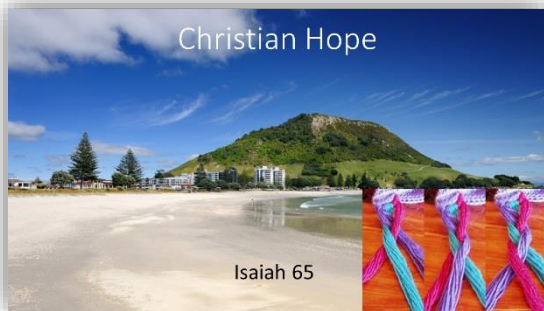


# The Christian Hope

Isaiah 65

Rev. Simon McLeay

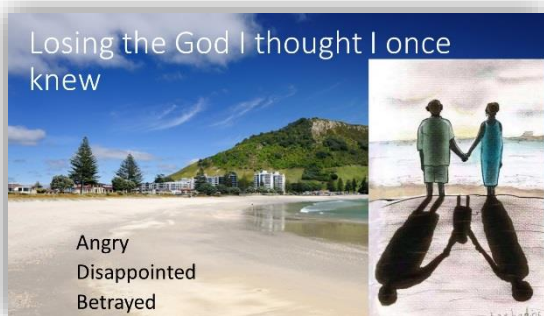
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I had the privilege of speaking at the Sands conference on Friday, SANDS are a support organisation for those who have lost a child through miscarriage, still-born or cot-death. And I want to share with you some of what I shared with them. But first I want to give a bit of context. We were speaking at youth last week about sex. It's important that we talk in church about sex and not ignore it. We spoke about the topic of safe-sex at one stage. We spoke about God's Plan A, that involves abstinence before marriage, but we also spoke about

contraception as a way to avoid or postpone pregnancy; about condoms and how they can offer some protection against sexually transmitted diseases. I'll always remember one grandma commenting about her granddaughter who was pregnant again saying that a packet of condoms only costs as much as a packet of chewing gum! Part of our discussion was intended to get families to pass on these messages to each other. We then talked about how safe sex is not just about contraception, but is about having sex in a relationship where you are emotionally safe and spiritually safe; that I believe is God's plan for marriage. Where two lives are intertwined. I love that verse a '3 three stranded chord is not easily broken' – because it doesn't imply that in marriage we are subsumed into each other, the individuals remain separate, but their lives, physically, emotionally and spiritually are woven together. (chord.)

But what I've been thinking about since is that safe sex is actually not avoiding anything, it is sex within a lifetime committed relationship where a child is conceived and loved. And my talk at SANDS, that I want to share with you is about how having that safety – emotional, family, and spiritual in place can make you safe even in the trauma of the death of a baby.



The death of a child is the worst trauma I know. I've felt that cold, numb emptiness, we miscarried our first child who at that time was the sum of all our dreams, I've had friends who've had multiple miscarriages, I've buried a number of still born children, and I've grieved with families over their older children when they have died.

When a foetus, a Baby or a child dies it is the most awful trauma. It sends us into a tail spin, into our own private grief cycle. And it disrupts our relationships. A husband and wife will so often process grief differently, and sometimes be angry at each other, grandparents get caught into the churn,

maybe even siblings. So it's not really surprising that our relationship with God often gets caught into the churning of our emotions. In a sense we ask God some of the same questions, that we ask of our spouse and family. Do you care, what did you do, where were you, **can we stay together after this?** But with God it is even more pointed, we often want to ask "Did you do this to me?"

I think the break down in our relationship with God that we often have during a time of great trauma can be understood as part of the family nexus of grief. Sometimes we get stuck in our grief or more particularly we get stuck in some relationship through our grief and never move on. I like to think of our grief relationship with God a bit like this. If you lose a baby and auntie is not that helpful, then our relationship with auntie will be forever changed. So I like to think about our relationship with God in the same way, it's like losing God, or losing the God I used to know. I want to encourage you today that we can find God again, but when we find God again he will look different; he will have aged, or he will be wearing casual clothes and look a bit different.

When we come to faith, we get to know about God, but we also come into a relationship with God. Following a trauma, it's often that second intimate level with God that is shaken. "I thought you were my friend, my protector?" Sometimes we have domesticated God, he's my mate who follows my agenda, rather than my Lord whose agenda

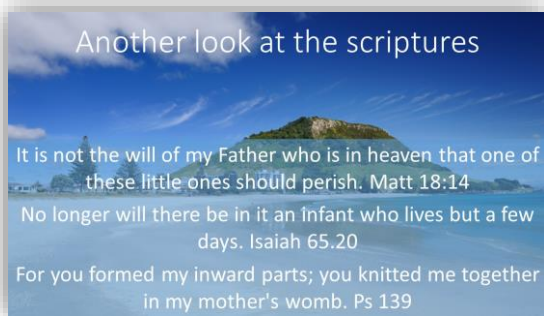
I follow. When thinking about God and grief I want to suggest 3 feelings you might have toward God after the loss of a baby. I suggest these because I think it is useful to be able to describe the emotion.

1. I'm **angry** with you God, you could have saved my baby, but you didn't. You might have a reason but I don't care. You've taken what was mine.

2. You're not the God I thought you were, I thought you were capable of looking after me and I'm **disappointed** in you.

3. You've let me down, you've been unfaithful to me, you have **betrayed** me, you have broken your promise to me and you have hurt me and I don't think I can trust you again.

Take a moment and see if you can identify if you have ever felt those emotions towards God? I think it's enormously useful to break down what we are feeling. Because we may need to forgive God before we can move on, and before we can forgive we need to know what we are forgiving. Probably most of us in our heads know that some babies die and that God has made no particular promise to us that our baby wouldn't die. But in our heart we feel betrayed.



The Christian view is that God made life and made it healthy and that His vision for the world didn't include infant death. The Vision from Isaiah is a vision of a renewed world and the Prophet makes it clear that early death was not God's plan. In fact, when we look at nature we see that God has implanted vitality into the world, yes the forces of death and chaos are all around, but life flourishes, you see life in the most extraordinary places, God is a God of life.

The Christian world view has this incredibly powerful way of describing the reality of the world we live in. The idea is called the fall, that God made the world good, but it has been

broken, broken by human sin and this accounts for the messy world that we are in. Life is fractured and because of the sins of others perhaps generations ago there are things that are unfair and painful that have come down to us. Just look at our waterways, and our air quality and the prevalence of human trafficking today. Sin is alive and well. Perhaps even our genes have been affected by the actions of those millennia ago, some diseases have been spread by human abuses, some infants and some unborn children die because of polluted water the world around. Put simply there are quite a few things broken in the world that aren't God's fault. Yes, God could have made a world without them, God could have made a world in which babies didn't die but that would have been a world without us. God is powerful, but has limited his power so that we can be free people. Yes.

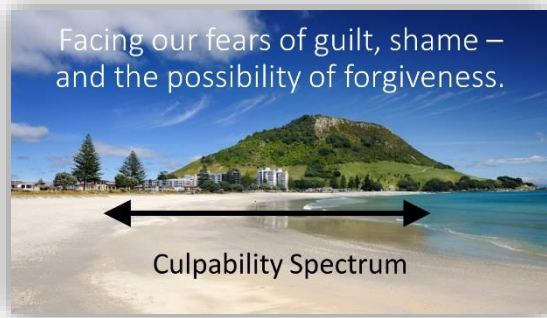
Let's also hear the comforting words of scripture. In the bible there are many references to childless parents, these presumably cover those who are unable to conceive, those who loose children in miscarriage or through still-birth, and those who lose their children in infancy, and the scriptures are in my opinion are very gentle with those who are childless, let's look at just a few.

Sarai the wife of Abraham was childless, God had promised Abram that if he followed him he would be the father of a great nation, and Sarah was part of that promise. Sarah followed her husband when he left their country, their home, their relatives and their security for God. Sarah was faithful to God. The story has a wonderful ending; God sends angels to Abraham when he was about 100 years old saying within a year you will have a baby. And Sarah laughed, because she believed that by all human reckoning, they were too old, they ought not to be able to conceive. And yet she did! And Isaac was born. This story can be an encouragement for any of us who have wondered if we will be able to have a child. When we lose a child, one of our senses of loss that gets mixed in – is the question "Will I ever be able to have a child?" Sarah is the story we should turn to.

One of Jesus miracles shows Jesus' deep compassion for those who have lost a child. Luke 7.11, Jesus is walking through a town where a woman has lost her son. She's a widow and he her only son. Now we don't know how old the son is, probably he's a teen ager, but he could have been an infant death. And here's the key line – a woman Jesus doesn't know. When he saw her, his heart went out to her. Jesus cares.

The book of Ruth tells the story of a family who go to a foreign land and there the mother loses her husband and her sons and she talks about how bitter the experience is for her. The story is about the faithfulness of Ruth, who sticks with her mother-in-law as Naomi goes back to her homeland a broken and penny-less woman. Ruth who comes from being a bit-player on the edge of the story, moves to being a central character. What is particularly beautiful in the story is the way that Ruth's faithfulness opens a door to a future where she later conceives and her mother in law rejoices over her grandson – having lost so much. This is a story about women supporting each other

through tragic loss, and it finishes with that grandson, being the grandfather of David the great king and ancestor of Jesus the greatest king.



Having said that Biblically I don't think God has targeted any of us for Judgement. There is still **our** sense of guilt and shame. Sometimes we can't forgive God, because we can't forgive ourselves. "I can't face my fear that I might have done something that contributed to my baby's death".

With every baby death there is a spectrum of culpability. On one end is an elective abortion without medical reason. Where a woman deliberately chooses to end a life within her. At the other end of the spectrum is where there is absolutely nothing the parents did to contribute to the child's death.

When something awful happens we often go looking for someone to blame, and we all place ourselves somewhere on the culpability spectrum. For the teen-age girl who had an abortion it might have been much more about dad's decision or her boyfriend's pressure than her choice. She may have terrible guilt for something she was only partly responsible for. If we drank heavily all through the pregnancy, or if we hit our partner during her pregnancy – maybe we do have some culpability; but equally people worry about the smallest things, I had a pain killer, I exercised too much, or too little, I ate nuts, or I didn't eat enough nuts. And sometime we shut out God, we don't listen to him, because we are afraid that he might want to judge us. When someone I care about says I've done something, and God is angry with me. I usually will say no, no, no. Don't be silly. - Those are terrible words "Don't be silly" because you are not being silly, you are trying to make sense of a tragedy. Something Marion once said to me suggests a different approach, why not own all the things I might have done wrong. Why not, once off, make a big list of all the things I might have done wrong. And just ask for God's forgiveness.

It's a radically different approach to seething, uncertainty, anger and guilt. To say maybe in some way, I contributed to this tragedy. Having done that ourselves, it may then open us up to forgiving God for not taking care of my baby like I expected.

This confession and forgiveness approach seeks to explore; is there something I am feeling subconsciously that I can't place consciously.

If I make a conscious ritual out of this, then I might interrupt a subconscious cycle. I'm not suggesting everyone needs to do this.

Let me suggest a frame work. Take a day and say this is my day of Atonement, and before that day make a list, list of all the things that you might have done, physical things (not obsessive) but the things that come to mind, emotional things like words you might have said, spiritual things that you are worried about, and then add a few things that you think you might not have done that perhaps you should have done. Put them all on the list. And then draw a simple cross on top of that list. Having prepared your list then go somewhere holy for you and pray asking God to be with you. Then read out your list as a list of confessions. Perhaps burn it. Then read 1 John 1.9

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*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.  
Say, I believe that your death on the cross Jesus is powerful enough to forgive me all of my sins  
and so I give you my sins and I receive your forgiveness. Amen.*

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You might want to include a friend a pastor or a priest. But what matters is that you do it once, you have a little time before hand where you ask God to reveal anything you might need to confess and then you accept that God is powerful enough that if he wanted you to confess anything else he would have told you. And you finish by receiving God's forgiveness and acknowledging that you will not return to your sins. The day of atonement in Israel was given so that people could feel forgiven. The bible says God has no need of the blood of bulls, The God of the bible doesn't need to be fed by sacrifice, Leviticus 19 makes it clear sacrifice was given so that people could experience forgiveness



Our world is broken because of sin and greed and selfishness. God has provided an answer. He gave His only son to us, who came into the world not to judge the world but to save the world.

When He was judged and crucified, Jesus took the place of the guilty, he came to stand with the condemned and the oppressed. He died so that we might be free. Jesus wept. He stood with the broken, he suffered at our violence. He is the crucified God.

In the midst of our own trauma sometimes we can come to see Jesus much more clearly, He can change our view of what

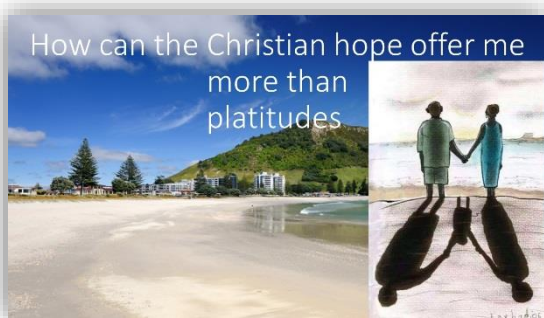
God is like. He is not that distant God, He is a God who comes to us, who meets us in the trenches of life, in the back streets and alley ways as much as in the high street.

Jesus shows us an attitude to violence that is powerful. He accepted what was to happen to Him without agreeing in any way that He deserved it. Jesus never said it was a good thing that he was to be crucified. He never endorsed the sin that caused Him to be sacrificed, or agreed with the violence meted out to Him. But He accepted it. Sometimes we need to accept without agreeing.

I believe that Jesus was the son of God made flesh, He didn't come to represent an angry God, but a loving God. He came and he taught and healed and loved. He had a particular love for children, we can see this when he told his disciples to leave the children alone and to let them come to him. But he also had a special love for sick children. There was a girl Jairus' daughter who died and we can see his gentleness as he went into her he cleared the room. Told all the loud grievors to go out. Then he was there with just mum, dad and a couple of his disciples, and he took the girls hand gently in his hand and spoke to her and raised her back to life. Then he said – don't tell anyone (don't post it on social media) but get her something to eat.

Jesus is the son of God who comes alongside us in our grief. He cries with us. He feels our pain. He willingly suffered pain for our benefit. God's little boy died too, not quietly in his sleep his little 33-year-old boy was strung up by some wanna-be politicians. And God sat watching him die. He knows the pain we have been through. He is not at a distance. He knows.

You may well know this Christian story that God sent his son to show us his love and then to die for us on the cross. For many people they learn the story in childhood, but it is only through deep pain and trauma ourselves that we start to understand that this simple story is actually a really deep story. The Christian view of God is not a fairy tale. Trauma awful though it is, can be a pathway to discovering a much closer and more real God. A God who is deeply concerned about people and the realities of life, who is not your therapist, but who loves you far more deeply than that, and a God who is not distant, but is right here with you in the pain. A Jesus who looks dishevelled like you might look after you've spent all day crying.



It doesn't end there. The Christian story does not end on Good Friday. After his death, God raise Jesus from the dead. This is the central claim of the Christian faith. It's an extraordinary claim, it is counter anything that has ever happened before. It is as big a change as the start of the universe. God did something huge. If you don't grasp how huge that is, then you won't pick up the sense of hope that comes from it. Because there is huge hope! If Jesus rose from the dead like the bible claims, then death isn't the end. Then when we say that our child has gone on to be with Jesus – we are not talking rubbish. There is real hope there.

Jesus said that he would come and take us to himself. I believe absolutely that he comes and takes our children home. And that surprisingly can be a real comfort. Yes, I miss my baby now, I had such hopes for them, I want to hold them, to stoke them, to whisper to them. How could you take my baby away? ... Gently.

When our babies die, in the womb, in child birth, in their cot, in infancy, in childhood, or in their 40's, God takes them away gently.

But the Christian faith offers more than this also. Our experience of trauma can change our view of God. Perhaps we need to break the image or idol of God that we have. Perhaps we started faith – despite all our words – with a view of God that if we are good he will reward us and we will do really well in life.

Perhaps our view of God needs to change to a God who is very much on our side, but also a God who doesn't promise everything will be rosy. Paul was clear that following Jesus meant sharing in his suffering, so that we could share in his redeeming, and then share in his resurrection. There is a good future – but there is also a now to be redeemed.

Without agreeing to the trauma that happened to us, we can accept it. Because when we accept brokenness, then we can start to allow our brokenness to help us help others. No one would say that it's a good thing their baby died, but perhaps good can come out of our response to that death. You can't change the events, but you can change the story around them.

Jesus I now offer you the death of my child, and say if you can now use the broken me to further your kingdom, then I am willing.

When we lost little Jo, it broke my heart; and it changed my ministry. No longer would I tolerate empty platitudes; God is deserving of better than that. And I humbly think it might have been bought a little more comfort to others having suffered. I know that even with the nurses, the ones who have had also suffered a miscarriage didn't tell us their story, but could just say "I know" and we could tell that they did know. And it was comforting.

This can also give us a different view of the church. Church is not meant to be a place where families come together and bring their children up alongside each other. It is meant to be a place where we mingle and co-mingle and where in time we who have lost a child can pour that love into another. If we think of it physically sometimes a mother who has lost a child can be a wet nurse for a child who has lost their mother. Church is meant to be a different sort of family. It should be a place where we can turn our hurt into hugs. I think of this globally as well, The Ruel foundation runs a children's home in the Philippines, where they run a children's home and care for among other children, malnourished children. The best thing you can do for the brain of a baby under 2 is to stare into his eyes, face time is fabulous for building the brain. Hold a baby, love a baby, gaze into its eyes and you will create millions of more neural pathways for that child.

In our lives, in our churches and in our communities, Jesus invites us to in turn our loss into compassion