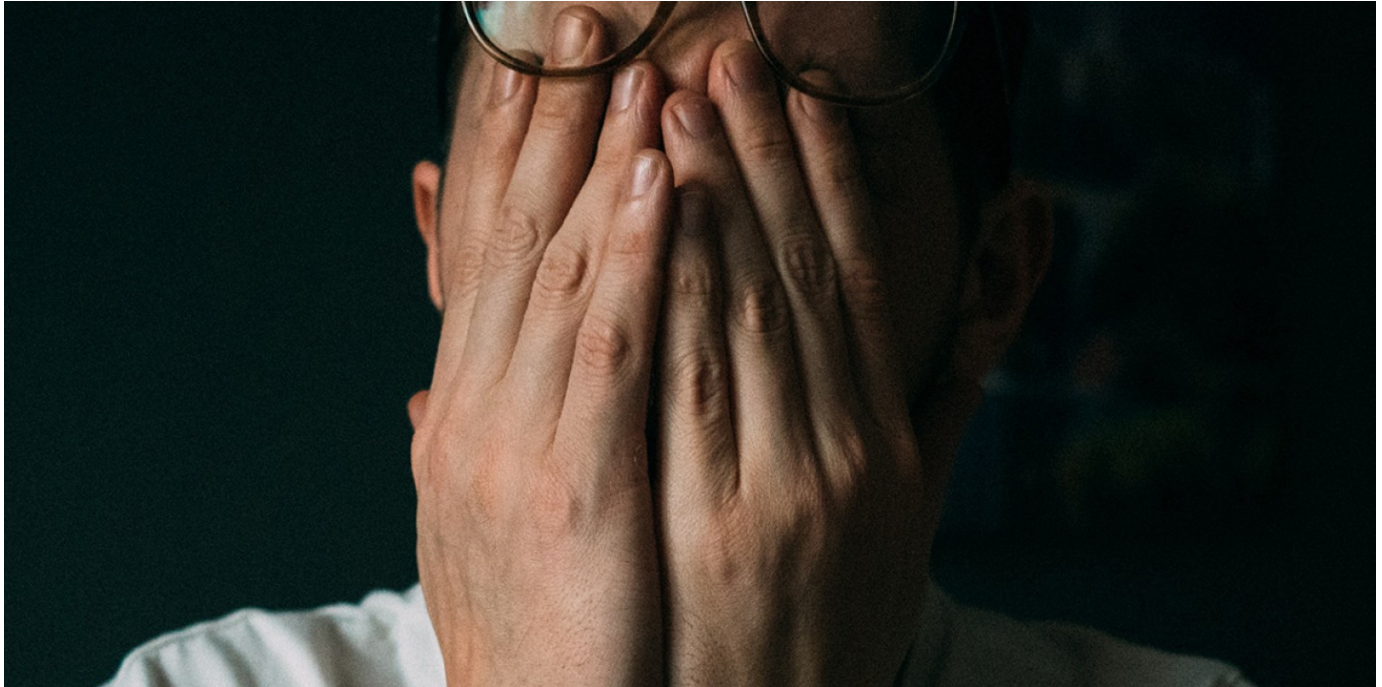


Giving disappointment its due

Some of our dreams won't be fulfilled. While this may be a mercy, that's no consolation.

by [Jonathan Tran](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue



(Pexels photo by Jacek Jan Skorupski)

I once applied for a job I was told was mine to lose. The closer I got to getting it, the more I dreamed—looking at homes to buy and schools for kids to attend, even planning good-bye parties. I imagined a new life. When I didn't get the job, I was crushed.

The disappointment went on for years. I found myself reliving it over and over, telling anyone who would listen. Bitterness set in, and a list of enemies grew—all the people who'd torpedoed my dream. The disappointment changed the way I related to the life I still had, darkening a dream job already in place and overshadowing blessings long ago bestowed. I began to regret my surroundings and resent a life I now felt stuck in. Disappointment did all this. I could not face the disappointment as disappointment.

Not all disappointments are so devastating or so dramatic. Sometimes it's less the dream job torpedoed and more the slow boil of a career playing out in disappointing ways. You look around and realize the life you're living isn't the one you signed up for. Well-laid plans fizzle out. Relationships you banked on career off course. Opportunities dry up. Life happens.

It's the relational disappointments that hurt most. Jobs, after all, can be changed—or at least left behind at the end of each workday. And while you can complain about how much your job stinks, you don't (or shouldn't) feel such license when talking about people you love. It's one thing to feel disappointed about the way life turned out; it's another to lay that disappointment at the feet of any one person.

I think disappointment stems from three inescapable features of human life. We are timebound creatures, experiencing the world through time. As such, we constantly project ourselves into the future—sometimes forgetting both the present right under our noses and the past not far behind. We can't help ourselves, leaning into a future sometimes a few steps ahead (the delicious dinner we've planned) and sometimes quite far-off (a job that's "ours to lose").

Time and projection then meet a third reality: finitude. Some imagined futures work out. We enjoy that delicious dinner or get that dream job. Others do not. Many of our projections meet the buzz saw of finite existence, the harsh reality that not every imagined future gets its way. Much of this is a mercy. No world could survive fulfilling all our dreams. But that's hardly consolation when life sets us up for disappointment.

We might think, *Disappointment's bad, but it ain't death*. But some philosophers argue that death has everything to do with disappointment. After all, what is death's sting other than the loss of an imagined future? Time, projection, and finitude conspire to punch us in the gut, knocking us off our feet. Some never get up.

Rarely do people stop to give disappointment its due. Instead, life goes on. Someone else got the job instead of you. The world doesn't stop because your life came to a screeching halt. No one mourns your loss like you do. Instead of acknowledging your disappointment, most people would rather deflect it or explain it away: "You dodged a bullet" or "It wasn't in the cards" or even "That wasn't God's plan." Our society lacks resources for acknowledging disappointment. We have rituals for mourning death but not for disappointment.

And no one avoids acknowledging our disappointment as much as we ourselves do. It hurts too much. It's easier to store up enemies and resentment. Instead of acknowledging disappointment, we deny the inescapable features of our lives as humans. We deny humanness in the attempt to live it. Call this our gnosticism, our most intimate heresy.

The things that disappoint comprise a whole litany of life's failings. Certainly careers and well-laid plans. But also family and friends. Our bodies disappoint us with their aging, ailing, and addling. Justice disappoints those who give their lives to it only to find freedom forever deferred. And who has not been disappointed by church? To be sure, some of this comes from unrealistic expectations of something the New Testament promises will disappoint. Still, the church keeps giving us more reasons for disappointment.

Scripture thematizes the human life in time—with its projections and buzz-saw disappointments—in terms of faith. And it does not hold back on acknowledging disappointment. Adam and Eve's catastrophic disappointment over the garden. Cain's murderous disappointment when God rejects his offering. David's disappointment when kingdom life turns out less than kingdom-like. Judas's disappointment with Jesus. In each case, God turns out to be our greatest disappointment. Is it more heretical to say this or to deny it?

The Bible reserves its greatest disappointments for scenes involving children, the embodied future. Children carry our hopes, bearing the weight of our expectations, fating us and them to disappointment. Through our kids we imagine the future and lose it. When their lives go awry the earth comes off its axis. I have known people whose disappointments over children—infertility, miscarriage, illness, death—ended their faith. I have known those disappointments myself.

No wonder God's faithfulness gets laid on the head of a single question: Will God give Sarah and Abraham children, or not? If God does, they will know God does what God promises, is who God claims. Conversely, no children, no God.

Refusing to explain things away, much less lie about the conditions setting us up for disappointment, God's word acknowledges it. The Spirit hears our disappointments just as the Son bears them, together entreating the Father's infinite life. Rather than manage expectations by asking less, God risks everything, beckoning us to faith's end, knowing full well that disappointment looms over the razor's edge between hope and despair.