

## Dealing with Frustration

MJCF November 5, 2023

Ecclesiastes 6:1-12, 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:7 -10

This past week, I (we) heard about the passing of Mr. (Tsutomu) Tada, a long time member of Mennonite Japanese Christian Fellowship. He was one of the founding members of the church, and although he was in a care home, not able to attend for a few years, his presence in spirit has been significant. Much of the church has been positively shaped through his influence. We knew he had struggled with cancer, but even so, to hear he had passed away still came as a shock...

When someone passes away, we are forced to think about what is most important in life. We look for fulfillment in many areas, working hard to get a good education, good job, enough money to cover expenses. We may also look for praise and recognition from people around us. Just before today's reading from the book of Ecclesiastes, in chapter five the writer (the Evangelist) concludes where we can find fulfilment. I'm reading from chapter 5, verse 18. "This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil – this is the gift of God. For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts." "Sounds good doesn't it? We do find joy when we acknowledge that God is the source of all that we have. Our work, our possessions, the things that give meaning and enjoyment in life are all gifts from God.

But, continuing in chapter six, the Evangelist raises a serious problem. What about when our desires are frustrated? What about when things don't work out, when we are left without meaningful work, or without things that we need? What about people who are not able to enjoy eating and drinking? Enjoying wealth, and work, and even gaining wisdom are good things, but the Evangelist then says that even these are "vapor" and a "chasing after the wind". He sees it as "a grievous ill" when people cannot enjoy the gifts of God. In biblical times, having many children, and a long life were seen as two of the greatest blessings. Yet, the Evangelist declares that even if a man has 100 children, and lives 1000 years, but does not enjoy his life, a stillborn child is better off than him.

Good things come and go, but often we don't even know what is good and what isn't good for us! There are no guarantees that wealth will make you happy. Hard work will not necessarily make you successful, and even working to gain wisdom does not guarantee satisfaction in life. The Evangelist concludes, "...who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass like a shadow?..." Life is short, and no one on earth knows the future. It is only God who knows.

In chapter six, the Evangelist gives a bit of a summary of the themes from the first part of the book, reflecting on toil, wisdom, and pleasure. What advantage are these? They are like "vapor and a chasing after the wind." It sounds quite frustrating!

We've all had times of frustration in life. Maybe you've tried and tried, working very hard at something, only to find out that it's not going to work, and all your effort has been for nothing. What's the most frustrating thing that you've experienced? One thing I thought of was an experience we had driving home from Calgary to Vancouver, just after Christmas. We had made the 13-hour trip many times before, without any problem. But, that year it was particularly snowy and icy. Sometimes we'd see places where people had slid off the road, or gotten into an accident. After the town of Golden we drove carefully through the snow for about 2 hours. Unfortunately, just 10 minutes away from the next town, we came to a group of people near an accident site. As there were already many people helping, we were debating whether or not to drive around them, and continue. Just then, the police arrived and immediately closed the road. Everyone had to turn back. As there was only one highway through that area, we ended up having to drive the 2 hours all the way back to Golden. It felt like our 4 hours of driving in heavy snow had been just a total waste. We were exhausted and felt totally out of control.

Life is unpredictable, and we can be frustrated in many different situations. Even if we're followers of Jesus, it doesn't mean we are guaranteed an easy life. We may seek success, but if we look at Jesus as our example, he was faithful to follow God's way of non-violent love even to the point of dying on a cross. His purpose was definitely not to be successful by the world's standards.

The Apostle Paul was one of the greatest evangelists, faithfully sharing the good news and deep insights about Jesus. Yet, he also had challenges. He faced many hardships such as shipwrecks, and people trying to kill him. We don't hear specific details, but he also struggled with some personal frustration. I'm reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:7-10, "...So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Eating, drinking, and enjoying the things we've received in life can be a source of joy when we remember to give thanks to God, the giver. But, when we are not able to enjoy life, when we do not see anything for which to be thankful, when it seems as if God has taken everything away. How do we respond? Through Paul, God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." When we feel frustrated and out of control, that is exactly the opportunity to see God's power. I believe that life is our time to practice recognizing where God is at work, and learn to trust more deeply. Even if we lose everything, we will always have God's grace. By God's grace, we have been given Jesus, the hope of all the world. To deeply understand how much love God has shown to us through Jesus changes your life, giving strength to face the challenges.

Last week, Friday, I attended a funeral for a church member at the Yayoidai church, Mrs. Iio. During the funeral, a letter written to her daughter was read. It was a truly beautiful letter of gratitude. Every year on her birthday, she wrote a letter looking back on the year, but she didn't give them to her daughter, she just wrote them down, but this summer was extremely hot, and remembering that she had reached the age of 95, she thanked God and her family, and wrote a letter of gratitude to God and her family. She threw away all her previous letters and only gave the last one to her daughter this year. The letter was read at the funeral. Thank you, thank you so much, was said many times.

With different people passing away recently, suddenly I'm thinking about how are lives are limited. We will all die someday, and everyone will stand in judgement before God. By faith, those who believe in Jesus Christ know that he was God "in the flesh". Because he took the sin of all the world, dying on a cross, and because he was raised to life, we see the strength of God's power, and the depth of God's love and forgiveness. We see that God's love for us is greater than any evil, any violence, any war. God's love is even stronger than death itself! So, whatever fears we may have, we can still live with hope, knowing that even death is not the end, knowing that God is ultimately in control. So, how does the knowledge of God's grace and love to us affect how we live?

May we learn to trust in the grace of God more and more deeply especially when faced with challenges. That is where the true test of faith will come. Let's pray.

O Lord, sometimes it feels like so much in this world is out of control. Wars in the Ukraine, and in Palestine, other conflicts around the world, the climate in crisis, and challenges in our families, in our workplaces, and beyond. When we're frustrated at how things are going, teach us to trust in you. We pray for patience to wait for your leading. When you call us to step out, grant us the courage to take steps of faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.