20240623 ENLARGING OUR SOUL

THROUGH GRIEF AND LOSS, BY SURRENDERING TO OUR LIMITS.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone lost someone or something they valued?

A long, long time ago, when I was a teenager, I dreamed of riding motorbikes. I bought my first bike at 18 and thought I had made it. Once Shirley & I had children, I realised I also needed a car, so had to sell my bike! But the dream never faded and after about 10 years, I finally bought another one. I hadn't asked God about this, but Shirley had agreed 😊 just to stop me from sulking!
Six months later, on my way home, a car collided with me and I woke up in hospital later that evening. I needed surgery to my knee, and eventually to my back and my neck, and my bike was a total write off. **And I grieved the loss of my dream**.

Doctors, far cleverer than I am, have tried to explain what happens to us when we experience any loss, and they have tried to explain it as dealing with stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. All are true, but I want to add "enlarges our soul" to this list, if we learn to deal with loss, biblically.

The phrase "enlarge our soul" refers **to expanding our capacity for love, compassion, and understanding**. The Bible shows us how devastating loss can be:

1.JOB & HIS EXPERIENCES

Job 1:13-22 (NLT2) (LOSS)

13 One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting at the oldest brother's
house, 14 a messenger arrived at Job's home with this news: "Your oxen were
ploughing, with the donkeys feeding beside them, 15 when the Sabeans raided
us. They stole all the animals and killed all the farmhands. I am the only one
who escaped to tell you."

16 While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "The
fire of God has fallen from heaven and burned up your sheep and all the
shepherds. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

17 While he was still speaking, a third messenger arrived with this news: "Three
bands of Chaldean raiders have stolen your camels and killed your servants. I
am the only one who escaped to tell you."

18 While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "Your
sons and daughters were feasting in their oldest brother's home. 19 Suddenly, a
powerful wind swept in from the wilderness and hit the house on all sides. The
house collapsed, and all your children are dead. I am the only one who escaped
to tell you."

20 Job stood up and tore his robe in grief. Then he shaved his head and fell to
the ground to worship. 21 He said, "I came naked from my mother's womb, and
I will be naked when I leave. The LORD gave me what I had, and the LORD has
taken it away. Praise the name of the LORD!" 22 In all of this, Job did not sin by
blaming God.

Job 2:7-9 (NLT2)

7 So Satan left the LORD's presence, and he struck Job with terrible boils from head to foot. 8 Job scraped his skin with a piece of broken pottery as he sat among the ashes. 9 His wife said to him, "Are you still trying to maintain your integrity? Curse God and die."

Jonathan Edwards (*an American revivalist preacher*) said: "**the story of Job is the story of us all**." Job lost everything in one day—his family, his wealth, his health. Most of us experience our losses more slowly, over more time throughout our life, and each loss we experience brings a measure of grief that goes with it. Some of the losses we experience are:

- **We lose our youthfulness**.
  No amount of special diets or medications, plastic surgery, cosmetics, or exercise routines can stop the process of growing older.
- **We lose our routines and stability during change**.
  Each time we change jobs, immigrate to a new country, or move homes, it **is a loss**. Our **children** leave home and our power and influence over them decreases. Or **our parents age**, and we become their caretakers.
- **We experience catastrophic loss.**
  Unexpectedly, **a family member dies**. Someone we know well commits suicide. Our spouse has an affair, and we find ourselves single again after a painful divorce or a breakup where we dreamed of marriage in the future.
  We are diagnosed with a life-threatening illness and have to change our lifestyle.
  Our employer downsizes, and suddenly we're **unemployed** after years of stable employment. A loyal friend **betrays** us. There are many other life examples: like, infertility, miscarriages, broken friendships, loss of memory or mental acuity, or abuse.
- **We lose our wrong ideas of God and the church**. (Thank God!)
  Discovering that what we've learnt and practiced all our life is either wrong or just immaturity in God can be traumatic. But we realize God truly is much larger and more incomprehensible than we first thought.
- **We lose our illusions about this new family of Jesus, the church**.
  It is not the perfect family with perfect people as we expected. People disappoint us, and even some church leaders we honoured, disappoint us. Perhaps we've been shocked that some of our church family have little or no awareness of the negative effect of sin in their life, and the impact this has on the church family.

Many of us will have learnt some protective measures from our childhood, needed at that time to protect us from pain, and we carry these defences into our adult life. These include **denial, or minimizing the issue, or either blaming ourselves or others, or we rationalize, intellectualize, distract, or resort to anger.** When we unconsciously live with these defensive strategies in adulthood, they block us from growing up spiritually and emotionally.

We need to discover, as Job did, **how God wants to use all times of loss to enlarge our soul** and then we'll end up with so much more!

2. LEARNING FROM JOB

Job, despite all the losses he experienced, chose to honour and worship God when he 'hit the wall' and experienced the 'dark night of the soul'. Even though his wife encouraged him to '*curse God and die*' he chose worship. His friends tried to talk

him into abandoning God, but after a long time waiting for God, suddenly God spoke to Job. In Job 42, God refers to Job as "my servant" four times, suggesting a **new level of intimacy and closeness** with Job.

Job 42:7-8 (NLT2)

7 After the LORD had finished speaking to Job, He said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "*I am angry with you and your two friends, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has.* 8 *So take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer on your behalf. I will not treat you as you deserve, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has.*"

The three religious friends who tortured Job with their judgmental attitude and proud, insensitive counsel faced an angry God. But still, in humility, Job prayed for them and blessed them.

We read that through all his suffering, through all his loss, Job acknowledged that *he needed God and without Him he could not survive!* Jesus says that this awareness is essential to enable us to mature in Him, (also in Luke 14:7–11; 18:9–14).

Matthew 5:3-5 (CSBBible)

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.
4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
5 Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth.

BAD EXPERIENCES ARE LIKE PATHWAYS TO NEW BEGINNINGS.

Facing the pain of our loss and turning to God, instead of employing one (or all) of our defence tactics, is totally against all that we're taught. When faced with the heart-rending grief of any loss, some of us have been taught to bury our emotions, to suck it up and get on with life!

Learning that my daughter, her husband and our grandchildren were moving to Germany permanently, was like a dagger in my heart. But I had been taught to control my emotions, to think and plan (rationalize) and see the benefits. I saw none for us, except the very occasional visit to Germany. But God had other plans for us, and now many children in this family see Shirley & I and hug us, surrounding us with love. And we love it! 😊

In fact, **the heart of Christianity is that the way to life is through death, the pathway to resurrection is through crucifixion.** (*That is so much easier to say than it is to live out!)*

John 12:24 (NIV)

24 I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

But, like Job, our first step is to realise that we cannot get through the pain caused by our loss on our own. We need God's help and as we eventually realize and say this, we have **started building the stages of humility** in our life.

These stages, which were recorded by Saint Benedict (±480AD to ±543AD) and have been summarized here, should help us in our growth. We do many of these stages at the same time. Jesus gave us the example of washing His disciples' feet, but here are some other stages we need to know about.

STAGE 1: FEAR OF GOD AND MINDFULNESS OF HIM

Fear as in awe, reverence, and respect of God, not fear of violence. During the day, we often forget the presence of God, acting as if He were not present.

1 Peter 2:17 (NLT2)
17 Respect everyone, and love your Christian brothers and sisters. Fear God, and respect the king.

STAGE 2: DOING GOD'S WILL (*Not Our Own nor Other People's*)

We recognize that surrendering our self-will to God's will for our lives touches the very heart of spiritual transformation. Learning humility means deciding to put aside what I want to do, satisfying my selfish desires and imitate Jesus' attitude.

John 6:38 (NLT2)
38 For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do my own will.

STAGE 3: WILLING TO SUBJECT OURSELVES TO DIRECTION FROM OTHERS

We are free to give up our arrogance and all-sufficiency, and are open to accepting God's will as it comes through others. Whether it's our manager, or a close friend, we do not respond in anger or any other defensive attitude.

Proverbs 15:22 (NLT2)
22 Plans go wrong for lack of advice; many advisers bring success.

Proverbs 19:20-21 (CEV)
20 Pay attention to advice and accept correction, so you can live sensibly.
21 We may make a lot of plans, but the LORD will do what He has decided.

STAGE 4: PATIENCE IN ACCEPTING THE DIFFICULTIES OF OTHERS

Each of us are on the journey towards Christlikeness together, some are behind you, others in front of you – but we're doing this as a family together! Each person needs to discover their weaknesses for themselves in their own way. Our responsibility is to love them enough to be patient with them, to be kind and to practice long suffering.

Matthew 10:22b (NLT2)
… But everyone who endures to the end will be saved.

As a family, there are always some people who are more difficult to get along with than others. We are required to just love them and allow God to change them from the inside outwards. He does not need our help!

STAGE 5: RADICAL HONESTY TO OTHERS ABOUT OUR WEAKNESSES/FAULTS

We call this *AUTHENTICITY!* We do not try to be '*like someone else!*' Being honest about our struggles as we talk to a trusted spouse, friend, parent as we seek their guidance in our spiritual growth.

James 5:16 (NLT2)
16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

Ephesians 4:25 (NLT2)
25 So stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbours the truth, for we are all parts of the same body.

STAGE 6: DEEPLY AWARE OF BEING CHIEF OF ALL SINNERS

1 Timothy 1:15-16 (NLT2)
15 This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all.
16 But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of His great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in Him and receive eternal life.

Understanding that no matter how hard we try, we are all sinners, (as Romans 8:23 says) and it is only by God's grace that we are saved from the deadly impact of sin. Acknowledging our complete dependence on God to save us and realizing that the people around us need the same grace, should make us kind and gentle with each other.

STAGE 7: BEING DETERMINED TO SPEAK LESS (OR WITH MORE RESTRAINT)

James 3:6 (NLT2)
6 And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.

The wisdom of speaking less is the outcome of spiritual growth (*Oh! I'm not as mature as I think!*) as we seek God and are filled with wisdom. The more we learn, the more we discover we do not know, and so we learn to keep silent. (*Our staff meetings have not learnt this yet* 😊)

STAGE 8: TRANSFORMED INTO THE LOVE OF GOD

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV)
18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

In this stage of humility, we've set aside our pride and arrogance, we choose to no longer use sarcasm, put downs or think of ourselves as more important than anyone else. We recognize our limits and the limits of others, and we are content to rely on God's mercy for life.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Our spiritual journey is a series of transformational moments (*growth spurts!*) that lead us towards our destination of being more like Christ. Here we discover the abundant fullness of God's blessings:

Job 42:12a (NLT2)
So the LORD blessed Job in the second half of his life even more than in the beginning.

We are challenged to turn to God, in all situations, even in the midst of pain-filled experiences, and allow Him to 'enlarge our soul' so we **expand our capacity for love, compassion, and understanding**.