

# Cutting deals

In this series about finding God as you face grief we read from Obadiah for an example of **anger** as Judah raged



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against the Edomites for siding with their enemy. Lamentations 1 composed a song of **despair** at Judah's fall. In Lamentations 3 the writer tried **bargaining** with God to bring vengeance on Judah's enemy. None of these common stages of grief healed or erased the pain of Judah's situation. But today Isaiah will remind us, as he speaks to Judah, that in the trials and tragedies of life God offers us encouragement and hope.

When you experience loss, whether it be physical, emotional or spiritual, the scars may last a lifetime. We know the old truism that "time heals all wounds," but we need to remember that scars often remain for the rest of your life. Don't like that? It does not mean you will never recover, but that your thinking, values, attitudes and life may be deepened and strengthened. A Vietnam veteran told me that the violence he witnessed and the wound from which he recovered revised his approach to life and made his faith in God deeper. The images of violence never completely went away but grace became God's gift of life instead of just a good word!

Isaiah 40-55 was written against the background of the Babylonian exile. For fifty years the Jews had lived with the memory of Jerusalem's destruction. They had been the minority, foreigners, often living in fear, immersed in a pagan society. In chapter 42 Isaiah clearly connects this tragedy, this overwhelming loss, to God's judgment on a people who ignored him and violated his laws.

But chapter 43 returns to the loving-forgiving-redemptive character of God with the simple words "but now." Suffering and punishment are not the final words for these wayward people of God. There follows a beautiful cascading list of affirming phrases, as the exiles are told this evil does not define them because they are precious to God,

created, redeemed and called by him (v. 1). In fact, God has sent an army to defeat their Babylonian overlords (v. 14). God never forgets his own and longs for their return. He reminds the Jews "I am the Lord, your holy one, Israel's creator, your king!" (v. 15).

It sounds as if God is re-introducing himself to these grieving exiles, calling them to see beyond their suffering: "When you pass through the water, I will be with you; the rivers ... they won't sweep over you; when you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched and flame won't burn you. I am the Lord your God" (vv. 2-3).

There is a difference between lenience and compassion. Lenience overlooks. Compassion faces the truth and offers a better way. This Savior God loves and knows his people. He understands their weaknesses and potential, and offers a grace that can heal and build a better life on their scars! No surprise the gospel is found in the Old Testament.

Isaiah's message is forward looking. Verse 18 emphasizes this: "Don't remember the prior things; don't ponder ancient history." This may well be a reference to the exodus from Egypt as they are pointed to what can be by God's leading: "Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up, don't you recognize it? I'm making a way for in the desert, paths in the wilderness" (v. 19). The images are reminiscent of Israel's forty-year journey to the Promised Land. This is what I call "a parable of history," a story about real people that can teach us how to live.

Life is not always easy. There are obstacles and tragedies, victories and advances. Every person decides whether to give up or keep on, become a victim or learn and grow. We all make mistakes. Everyone has scars. But God keeps on saying, "Look! I'm doing a new thing."

Isaiah has great expectations as the people return to Judah, but he knows it will not be just as it was before the exile. Recovering from a tragic loss takes time and usually the scars never completely disappear. We don't forget the past easily. We do not all heal in the

## Formations

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same way or at the same pace.

When faced with grief we usually want to know, "Why?" Is this God's will....God's doing....punishment....a sign we are going the wrong direction.....a warning our faith is inadequate? Where is God in this? Isaiah's people believed they were God's chosen, so how could God permit this exile, this debasement of the temple, this shame before a pagan world? In this particular situation we can smugly say they deserved what they got! Does that assessment make the tragedy easier for the exiles to accept? Isaiah points out the reason, but he is quick to move on to hope. What you do in the aftermath of pain sets the future. God is in the business of redemption, healing, and a new life. A healthy grief process is like a healthy spiritual life that does not end with "why," but with "what now?"

Faith in God is the essential orientation for life. The Apostle Paul reminds us: "We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Romans 5:3-4). Hebrews 11:1 declares: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Life challenges us all to learn and grow in both joys and sorrows. None of us is exempt from heartache, but God's grace and love in Jesus Christ is our hope and strength.

We all work through the stages of grief in our own order and timing. Remember what God said through Isaiah to those exiles: "Don't dwell on the prior things; don't hold on to ancient history thinking it will take away your pain. Look! I'm stepping into your circumstances to do something new; can you see hope like a growing plant flourishing and offering the fruit of a new beginning?" (Is.43:18-19 MKO paraphrase). It's time to move on!

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