

So, if disappointment is part of the warp and woof of life east of Eden, what is it for? This is an important question because disappointment not only robs us of our joy; at its worst, it can shipwreck our faith. So what are we supposed to do with it? Paul gives us the clue in the title of this book: the secret is to invest it wisely. To see God's hand at work and allow it to shape our attitudes and mould our desires. Far from being an enemy to be feared, disappointment invested well will drive us into the arms of God. At best, it will make us hungry for him and homesick for heaven.

Writing with warmth, insight and sensitivity, Paul doesn't lecture us. Rather, he sits down beside us and, like the true pastor he is, gives expression to our fears. It feels as if *Invest Your Disappointments* has been written by an understanding friend.

Paul reads widely and thinks deeply, but he always wears his learning lightly. He moves freely between Martin Luther, John Calvin and Tim Keller on the one hand and T. S. Eliot, William Shakespeare and Dag Hammarskjöld on the other. Above all, the author enjoys quoting from C. S. Lewis, so I'll finish with a C. S. Lewis quotation of my own, taken from *The Last Battle*:

Now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.<sup>1</sup>

But, like Paul, let's leave the last word to God himself:

For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd;  
 'he will lead them to springs of living water.'  
 'And [I] will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'  
 (Revelation 7:17)

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## Introduction

### Carrying the tears inside . . .

He was going to be called Nathan.

After a five-year courtship and a six-month engagement, I married Edrie, my childhood sweetheart. I got a job as a religious education teacher, and we moved into our first home in Wiltshire. The first year was crowned with the exciting discovery that Edrie was pregnant.

We had already decided that we wanted a large family: I said five; Edrie preferred six. We couldn't wait to tell everyone – this would be the first grandchild. My dad cried and my mum made a cup of tea. Edrie's parents prayed, and her dad anticipated a new phase in his family history research.

We told a few friends. Others found out and sent us congratulations. We attended antenatal classes. The date for the birth was set: 23 April, St George's Day. We began to dream. We agreed on names.

He would be called Nathan.

And then, in the middle of a cold winter's night, Edrie began to experience severe pains. We saw the doctor the next day and he admitted her to hospital. She wept as the consultant told us that our baby was gone. He assured us that there were no long-term complications, and having children in the future would be a real possibility.

But his assurances seemed hollow.

Edrie was devastated. She had to have minor surgery, and they gave her strong painkillers – but nothing could touch the emotional pain she felt at the loss of our first child. Her body had prepared her for something that would never happen.

And that's what it felt like – the loss of a child. We never actually met Nathan, but he was already part of our lives. And, of course, with grief comes a whole series of irrational feelings and distressing questions. What had we done wrong? Were we being punished? Why had God allowed us to experience joy and sorrow in such intimate proximity? Would we really be able to have children? Would we ever be happy again? We were embarrassed about telling people and felt guilty about our fears.

Miscarriage is a particular kind of loss, and it is easy to minimize it. You are grieving for a person you never knew and for a relationship that ended before it really began. We had lost a baby – even the words sound strange, curiously like carelessness. It's a kind of hidden tragedy, like something to be ashamed of. You carry the tears inside.

Nathan left us thirty-five years ago, at the time of writing – that's half a lifetime. Edrie experienced two more miscarriages, but we now have four children and numerous grandchildren. However, Edrie still feels a kind of wistful sadness. April 23rd never comes around without her reminding me that it would have been Nathan's birthday.

I guess that it was our first real experience of how bitter disappointment could be.

Of course, we had both experienced it many times before. I remember the moment when it dawned on me that I would never be a centre forward for West Bromwich Albion – I was six at the time! Edrie regretted never getting to see a live performance of Abba, her favourite pop group. But these are minor things – we look back and even laugh about them. This was real. This would affect our lives for ever.

Disappointment is part of the universal human condition.

It is the sadness we feel when our hopes are shattered and our expectations fail to be realized. It is a subjective response to painful circumstances. It can easily lead to disillusionment, disenchantment and discouragement. In extreme circumstances it may even result in a collapse of faith.

We cannot avoid disappointment, but how do we avoid being paralysed by it? And what can we learn from it?

Of course, disappointment can be extremely painful, paralyzing even. Yet, at the same time, it can become a source of growth and a spur to maturity. It is unhealthy to brush painful feelings under the carpet – the Bible never does so. Instead, it meets them head-on, and so must we.

If God folds disappointment into the texture of our lives, then it is for a purpose. Understanding ourselves, and the causes of our disappointments, will give us perspective and courage. Grasping something of God's purpose will give us patience and hope.

The way in which our hearts react to disappointments will determine the direction of our lives. If we allow grumbling and criticism to grip our hearts, we will struggle with disappointment and allow it to shape our whole outlook. If, on the other hand, we cultivate a grateful, thankful heart, we will learn to deal with disappointments in a God-honouring way.

In this book we will take a journey through the Land of Disappointment. The landscape will be familiar to all of us, though we may come upon some yet-undiscovered vistas. On the way we will discover strength to continue the journey. The greatest comfort of all will be to look beyond our current pilgrimage to what hymn writer Isaac Watts called 'a land of pure delight'.<sup>1</sup> There our desires will be purified, our expectations realized and our hearts will be eternally satisfied. Disappointment will be gone for ever.

I hope that the help you will find here will be solidly biblical – in the end our greatest balm of all is the medicine found in Scripture. I also hope you benefit from the pastoral insights and

practical applications that decades of people helping have afforded me.

Each chapter concludes with a series of questions, for personal reflection or to aid group discussion. When we talk about our disappointments with others, we very quickly discover that we are not alone.

May the God of all comfort, comfort us in all our troubles, 'so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ' (2 Corinthians 1:4–5).

Interwoven with the journey or travelling metaphor is that of banking and wise investment. How can we invest our experience of travelling through the Land of Disappointment in a healthy way so that it will pay rich dividends?

Let's prepare for the journey ahead. Let's be courageous and intentional about our investment of disappointment as we aim for healthy, lasting growth.