

A person is walking away from the viewer on a wide, sandy beach. A long, straight line of footprints leads from the foreground towards the person. The ocean is visible in the distance, and the sky is a pale, hazy blue. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

8. INESCAPABLE TRAGEDY, SELF- IMPOSED HELL, OR TRANSCENDENT PEACE?

*Most of us don't realize that in their
life much misery and hellish events,
are self inflicted*

#NCSAMENTALHEALTHDEVOTIONS

INESCAPABLE TRAGEDY, SELF-IMPOSED HELL, OR TRANSCENDANT PEACE?

Jeremiah 10:23: "Lord, I know that none of us are in charge of our own destiny; none of us have control over our own lives." (GNB)

Inescapable tragedy or self-imposed hell or transcendent peace. Which one will you choose? COVID-19 has left many of us feeling very stressed out. Maybe you've heard yourself saying to somebody: "I am starting to feel really depressed."

Just last night we heard that the lockdown would be extended to the end of April. This may have brought some new fears, new worries and new emotions within ourselves. Were the three weeks not enough cause to worry? We would have been under this lockdown with all its consequences for three weeks, but now it will be for 5 to 6 weeks. What if it is extended again? What makes this whole situation so bad, is that we feel completely out of control. To us, COVID-19 is an inescapable tragedy.

When reading the following in Jeremiah 10:23, "*Lord, I know that none of us are in charge of our destiny, none of us are in control of our own lives ...*", I wonder what this inescapable tragedy means. Does it mean there is a lot of things in life that we do not have control over? This type of loss of control of circumstances is referred to as the suffering of **major** losses. We did not ask for these losses. Currently we are facing losses in terms of:

- illnesses - our health is lost,
- security,
- death,
- jobs,

**AN INESCAPABLE TRAGEDY IS
TRAUMA OR LOSS OVER WHICH
YOU HAVE NO CONTROL.**

- social interactions because of the social distancing of COVID-19,
- finances,
- routine,
- our stable economy and
- relationships.

Maybe when the lockdown started, spouses said: "I'm not with you during this lockdown, I'm going somewhere else, to someone else ...", and the relationship has been lost.

There are so many losses we are currently facing and sometimes they compound and are inescapable. These tragedies are not something we chose or something that came into our lives because we caused it. It is something that came from somewhere else. When we go through these losses, our bodies react by **grieving**. We struggle with grief and with grief often comes feelings of confusion and anxiety. This is what you might be feeling right now. It is not necessarily depression that you are going through, it could probably be grief. Remember, grief and depression are not the same.

If you are struggling with loss right now and you are grieving, it is a completely normal reaction to significant loss. Grief has been described in various ways. One way to describe it is to say that grief is a very complicated and confusing time. Therefore, if everything feels messed up and tangled up right now and things make no sense, you are probably grieving. We often think of grief as something that comes when we are faced with death. But grief manifests whenever we face any type of loss. Our bodies react to that which is taken away from us. However, it is true that grief feels a lot like depression.

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As a matter of fact, they are probably identical in many of their manifestations, but the origins are different and also how long they last. Grief is circumstantial and doesn't last long. Let me rather say it lasts as long as you are working through the loss which you've experienced. Depression however goes into a longer period of time and even when the situation has been removed, it still remains. The feelings of unhappiness still remain.

I want us to look at grief, because I believe that is one of the things a lot of us are struggling with right now. Grief has two major components. It is an intense **emotional** as well as a very intense **physical** reaction to significant loss. It affects our emotions, our thoughts, our physical bodies, our spiritual well-being, as well as our behaviour.

Let us look at the following example: Something we all have lost right now, is the right to move around freely. We also lost the right to socialise because of social distancing. We cannot go and visit our aunts, uncles or friends. We can't meet at shopping malls, we can't go and eat out together. We are basically stuck with whoever is within our home. Even within our home one of our family members could have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and we are in self isolation and cannot really interact with one another. All of these come along with emotional, physical, cognitive, spiritual and behavioural changes. This then, is grief.

Let us look at how grief manifests in each dimension:

- Emotionally: With the lockdown and social isolation some of you might have experienced feelings of anger. Maybe even feelings of rebellion, saying: "I am going out!"

GRIEF IS AN INTENSE EMOTIONAL AS WELL AS A VERY INTENSE PHYSICAL REACTION TO SIGNIFICANT LOSS. IT AFFECTS YOUR EMOTIONS, THOUGHTS, PHYSICAL BODIES, SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING, AS WELL AS YOUR BEHAVIOUR.

Don't tell me I can- not go out and be with my friends!" Frustration because you cannot move around and you cannot see your friends. Irritation and maybe even sadness because of the loss of those friendships and the loss of the social interactions.

- Cognitively: You also have certain thoughts about the changes. Maybe you've been thinking: "I need to get out. I can't stand this suffocation." Maybe you have very morbid thoughts such as: "This is the end of the world! How are we going to survive it? What if I can't see my loved ones ever again? What if this thing continues? What if somebody dies and I cannot go to the funeral because only a few people are allowed at the funeral?" You might even be struggling in your mind and in your thoughts with concentrating. You are trying to do your work from home, but all you can think of is COVID-19 and of what is going to happen to you financially. You might even experience decreased motivation because of the loss of routine. You used to have a specific routine and now it is all scrambled up, it is messed up. The routine has been taken away from you and you need to find a new reality.
- Physically: Your body might have responded to the changes as well. Some people may because of the anxiety they feel, experience a warm tingling feeling within their stomachs, a type of nausea. You may be experiencing extra headaches and tension in your body where your muscles are tensing up because of stress. You may even experience anxiety and an increased heart rate where you literally feel your heart beating faster when you hear news about certain things. Perhaps you are experiencing difficulty in sleeping, or a loss of appetite, not feeling like you want to eat, feeling restless, wanting to go out, not wanting to feel stuck.
- Spiritually: For most people it is different. Some people come closer to God during this time.

**ASK YOURSELF, WHAT LOSS HAVE I
SUFFERED? HOW IS IT EFFECTING
MY MIND? MY BODY? MY SPIRIT?**

Others start asking questions regarding God and the realities He allows in their lives. They start doubting. Spiritual anger may come up. Doubt and disappointment in God may also arise.

- Behaviourally: You are affected because of the lockdown, because of social distancing, because of all the other things that have been taken away from you. Because of the losses you experience, you may become less tolerant towards others. You need to be careful, especially within your household. Being cooped up together, you may become rude and irritated. You may be more prone to fights and outbursts. You may actually feel that you need isolation because you are surrounded by your family so much. You may lock yourself in your room or go and sit outside in the garden just to be alone. So your behaviour is changing. You cannot control your emotions and you make no effort to do so. You just let loose. Whatever you feel, you will say or do. Some people are taking on reckless behaviour, something like: "I don't care what the law says, I'm going out and I'm going to see my friend." I personally have seen some terrible videos on the internet where people are being really stupid and silly, licking toilet bowls and drinking out of the same cup. They record themselves showing that they are not scared of getting this thing called COVID-19.

What really is happening, is that we are feeling very **out of control**. Our normal routine has been taken from us. We suffered a significant loss and we are experiencing pain because of it. Emotional, cognitive, spiritual and physical pain. A lot of times, we feel as if we cannot control these responses. "How am I supposed to control how I feel? How am I supposed to control the thoughts that keep coming into my mind?"

A KEY CHARACTERISTIC OF GRIEF IS THE EXPERIENCE OF FEELING OUT OF CONTROL, AND BADLY WISHING FOR A SENSE OF CONTROL.

I do have these questions and doubts about God and my body is doing all kinds of strange things." All we really want in this pain and confusion, is to gain that control back. We want to feel less pain, and the way we try and cope with this pain, is by our behaviour. We call this a **coping mechanism**.

Let me ask you. Have you been able to identify your behavioural coping mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic? The things you do to distract you from the pain, or to make the pain less, or make it go away? Do you watch more series or television? Do you binge eat? Do you get involved in things that you should not be involved in? Do you take risks, like reckless behaviour, going to places you shouldn't be going to? Not taking the necessary precautions you should be taking because you feel you can't take it anymore? Or do you perhaps try to control events? What I mean by that is, do you try and control everything in your life in order to feel better? Do you try and control people? Yes, you cannot control COVID-19. Yes, you cannot control your emotions and your thoughts and everything that goes with it. And because of that, you are trying to control people, telling them what to do and how to behave. This trying to control people and events is going to get you into trouble.

The only thing you really can control right now, is how you act. There is a specific way how you do this. The realisation of the fact that the only thing you can control is yourself, leaves people feeling very anxious. Unfortunately many people practice unhealthy behaviour. Although you know you can and should control yourselves during this time, you often end up in self-destructive behaviour. You might not be licking toilet bowls and drinking out of the same cup, but there are other ways in which you might be practising destructive behaviour. Or, as it could be called, a **self-imposed hell**.

IN GRIEF YOU WANT TO FEEL LESS PAIN, AND THE WAY YOU MAY TRY AND COPE WITH PAIN IS BY CERTAIN BEHAVIOUR. WE CALL THIS A COPING MECHANISM.

How are you creating a self-imposed hell during this time? Because of the loss of control that you are experiencing, you often feel very helpless. You try to regain control by trying to control the outcomes of COVID-19, trying to change the situation or trying to control people. The result is that you end up in a rat's nest of misery, a self-inflicted hell.

Let me explain what I mean by using a story from the Bible:

Abraham and Sarah could not have children, because Sarah was barren. God had promised Sarah and Abraham, that they would have a son who would inherit everything they had (Genesis 15:4). But as time passed, no son came and there was nothing they could do about that. They had to patiently wait upon the promise of God. They could not bring about the son quicker. Unfortunately, because they've experienced this tragedy they had no control over, they tried to manipulate the situation. They tried to make the promise happen quicker and control the outcome.

*Sarah became impatient and went to her husband and said to him: **"Here is my Egyptian slave girl, Hagar. Go off and sleep with her."** And so he did. The Bible tells us that Hagar became pregnant. The problem with this is that the outcome was much worse than the tragedy of her not having children. Sarah still didn't have children of her own. The Bible further tells us that the consequences of her trying to control the outcome and to control what needed to happen, landed her up with a lot of tragedy.*

Let me tell you about this tragedy. Genesis 16:4-6 tells us when Hagar found out that she was pregnant, she became proud and despised Sarah.

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So the relationship between Sarah and her slave changed. Afterwards, Sarah went to her husband because Hagar was treating her unfairly, and told Abraham it was his fault that Hagar despised her. Which resulted in not only her and Hagar being at odds with one another, but she and her husband were in a fight with one another. Sarah treated Hagar so cruelly, that she ran away. Sarah thus became a cruel person. Hagar ran away with her son and now Abraham's son was somewhere in the desert. [We know the end of the story]. God did eventually come through and He did fulfill His promise to them and He gave them Isaac.

Because of the scheming and wanting to control the outcome of a situation, two rival nations were born into this world and they are fighting up until today. Isaac and Ishmael are known through the nations of the Jewish people and the Arabs. The Arabs being the Muslims and the Jewish people we know very well. If you go to Jerusalem today, you still find the separation. When you walk through the streets of Jerusalem, there are certain sections that are called the Jewish Quarter and others the Muslim/Arab Quarter. Although anyone is free to move through any of the quarters, the Jews do not frequently visit the Muslim quarter and the Muslims do not frequently visit the Jewish quarter. Jews and foreigners are not allowed in the Muslim areas on the Temple Mount at all. This constant fighting and a family been torn apart, was because of meddling with an inescapable tragedy. Sarah tried to control the situation and therefore imposed a hell onto herself and a hell onto her husband and all the nations and people that followed after that.

Most of us do not even realise that much of the misery and hellish events and feelings in our lives, are self-inflicted. We do not reason from cause to effect, meaning that we do not ask the question: "What are my actions going to bring about?"

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Yes, we feel anxious because of this inescapable tragedy of COVID-19, and yes, we try to control our emotions by eating lots of junk food. The result is that we gain weight, we feel worse and we end up being fatter and feeling more depressed and anxious. A self-inflicted hell.

Be careful that during this time, you do not bring more hell upon yourself. You need to learn to stop and think. Reason from cause to effect. Go to God for wisdom. If you are not sure what to do, if you are not sure what your actions are going to bring about, ask Him what the best action is. Lay your plans before Him, He will help you to get the favourable results. You think you know best, but you forget to take God into your life and trust Him. You become very self-sufficient.

Proverbs 14:12 tells us that: *“There is a way that seems right unto a man, but the end of it leads to destruction.”* Have you discovered that during this time of lockdown, you acted in certain ways that you thought would be for your best interest, but it turned out in tragic, in self-inflicted hell?

Proverbs 3:5 and 6 say: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.”* In other words, surrender this urge to have control and to know what the outcome is going to be. Do not try and sort things out in your own way. You may think you know the answer and how to fix things, but rather go to God. Do not lean on your own understanding. You need to learn to reason from cause to effect. Asking yourself whether this is going to give you the best results.

If we are not careful, bad times can become terrible times. It can become a rat's nest of misery.

IF YOU ARE NOT SURE WHAT TO DO, IF YOU ARE NOT SURE WHAT YOUR ACTIONS ARE GOING TO BRING ABOUT, ASK GOD WHAT THE BEST ACTION IS.

Life does bring inescapable misery at times. Things that are out of our control, but we make it worse by adding self-imposed misery. The one is a tragedy, the other one is hell. We can live with a tragedy, but we do not want to add a hell to our lives. We can, for example, not be at our father's death bed and that is a tragedy; but we can make it hell by being at our father's death bed and fighting with our siblings about what he put in the will. It is true that tragic circumstances do bring out the dragon within us. Stress levels are high and all the things we did not deal with inside of ourselves, come out because we do not have the energy to repress it. All the bitterness just streams out and we start acting strange in situations. I've seen this happen. Ugly, ugly situations. Murderously ugly situations that we find ourselves in.

I've also seen the opposite. Terrible things happened to some families, but they pulled together instead of falling apart. This is what we really should be working towards. We are already in a tragic situation. Let us not add to this tragedy by causing hell. Let us pull together. Let us not try and control each other, or try and control the outcome of the situation. Let us go to God. Pray to Him and ask Him to help us to stand through this time.

Are you busy causing a self-imposed hell? Do not make this lockdown harder than it already is. Do not make your circumstances harder to endure. Think before acting. Your words can make situations worse. Your deeds can make situations worse. Stop trying to control the outcome. Stop trying to control people. Leave the outcome in God's hands after you have prayed and asked Him to help. Rather work on controlling your own behaviour and emotions than trying to control people. Look at your own coping mechanisms and your own behaviour.

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CIRCUMSTANCES HARDER TO
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Ask yourself if your coping mechanisms are good ones or bad ones. Are they healthy ones, or are they going to bring about more destruction?

Have you ever tried to change yourself? Have you succeeded? How difficult do you think it is going to be to change the situation, or to control someone else, if you cannot even control yourself? The Bible tells us that we need to guard against trying to tell people how to act and how to behave. In Matthew 7:3 and 5 we read: *“Why, then, do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the log in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will be able to see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”*

We think if we gain control over situations and people we will feel calmer, less anxious. Yes, we are faced with inescapable tragedies, but we can, by God leading and helping us, avoid self-inflicted hell. We can avoid this hell by going to Him in prayer and asking Him for wisdom on how to respond to these tragedies of life. God will not only offer to save us from ourselves, from our self-inflicted hell, but He will grant us peace amidst the tragedies of life.

If you want your anxiety level to go down, if you want your thoughts and your emotions to be better during this time, I would like to direct you to the Bible for guidance. For me the book of Philippians is the psychology of the Bible. A lot of times the reason we suffer from a self-inflicted hell, is because our thoughts and emotions are not controlled. We struggle with our thoughts and emotions because we cannot switch them off and we do not know how to control them.

**ASK YOURSELF IF YOUR COPING
MECHANISMS ARE GOOD ONES OR
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BRING ABOUT MORE
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Philippians 4:6-7 says: *“Do not worry about anything, but in all your prayers, ask God for what you need, always asking Him with a thankful heart.”* When we’ve done that, a promise follows: *“The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts (your **emotions** that are running wild) and your minds (your **thoughts** which you cannot switch off) safe in union with Christ Jesus.”*

You might now say this is really easy. You just go to God in prayer, tell Him what you want, tell Him what is bothering you and your emotions and thoughts will be calmer and therefore your actions will not be so out of control and you will not have this hell? Really, is that it? Just pray?” But then again, “I have prayed and nothing has happened!”

Did you really pray? I am not talking about the charismatic prayers where you stand on the street corners and cry out God’s name. I am not talking about using fancy words or long prayers. I am talking about really praying. Real prayer is to talk to God like you would talk to a friend, the opening up of your heart and your emotions before Him. I do not know about you, but when I speak to a friend about something that is bothering me or a tragick experience I had, I do not go to her and say: “Dear Susan, today was a hard day. You are my friend and because you are my friend, I know it is going to be okay. Please, will you help me? Okay, bye. I am going home.”

Many of us are praying like that. We do not really get into the details of what is happening when we pray. We do not open up our emotions, we pray very superficially. We need to pray like we talk to our friends. We need to tell God everything. We need to tell Him about our bad days.

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We need to fall on our knees and pray and cry and tell Him even the bad things that we are thinking. God is a parent and He understands when we go through hardships. He wants us to lay our cares on Him. He says: *"Cast your cares on me for I care for you."*

The way we should pray is how Samuel's mother prayed. We read about her prayer in 1 Samuel chapter 1. It tells us that when she went to God with a desire in her heart, when she was faced with an unchangeable situation, she fell down on her knees and she prayed so intensely that Eli thought she was drunk.

When you pour out your heart before God in such a way, how do you think you will feel? I think you will feel relieved. This is what God can do for us. Do not sabotage your own happiness. Do not try and control situations and as a result turn tragedy into hell. If you do not know how to act, go and ask God. If you are struggling to reason from cause to effect, ask God.

"If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). We need to learn to go to the Lord. We need to learn that He can give us a peace that surpasses all understanding, even if the situation does not change. When we pray to God, when we lay the situation before Him, we can still end up in inescapable tragedies but we avoid the self-imposed hell. God grants us a peace that does not make sense, because situations might not change. If you haven't tried it, I recommend that you try it and lay your burdens before the Lord today.

**PRAY LIKE SAMUEL'S MOTHER
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