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## When a Loved One Leaves Jehovah

**M**ARK and Louise are Jehovah's Witnesses.\* With love and care, they taught the Scriptures to their children, as the Bible exhorts Christian parents to do. (Proverbs 22:6; 2 Timothy 3:15) Sadly, not all of their children continued to serve Jehovah upon becoming young adults. "My heart aches for the children who strayed," says Louise. "How can I pretend that it doesn't hurt desperately from day to day? When others speak of their sons, my throat tightens up and I have to hold back tears."

Yes, when a person chooses to leave Jehovah and the way of life set out in the Scriptures, faithful family members typically experience deep anguish. "I love my sister very much," says Irene. "I would do anything to see her come back to Jehovah!" Maria, whose brother turned his back on Jehovah to pursue a course of immoral conduct, says: "This

\* Some names have been changed.

has been hard for me to bear because in every other respect, he has been a wonderful brother to me. I especially miss him at large family gatherings."

### Why Is It So Hard?

Why does the spiritual loss of a child or other loved one cause such deep distress to Christian relatives? Because they know that the Scriptures promise eternal life on a paradise earth for those who remain loyal to Jehovah. (Psalm 37:29; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:3-5) They look forward to sharing these blessings with their mates, children, parents, siblings, and grandchildren. How it pains them to think that their loved ones who have stopped serving Jehovah may miss out! Even with regard to their present life, Christians appreciate that Jehovah's laws and principles are for their benefit. Christians are therefore heartbroken to see their loved ones sow in such a way as to ensure a bitter harvest.—Isaiah 48:17, 18; Galatians 6:7, 8.



*Being absorbed in spiritual activities can help you keep the right perspective*

It may be difficult for some who have never experienced such a loss to appreciate just how devastating it can be. Virtually every aspect of life is affected. "It has become harder and harder to sit at Christian meetings and see parents laughing and talking with their children," says Louise. "Any happy event is overshadowed by emptiness because of the ones missing." One Christian elder recalls the four years during which his wife's daughter cut off association with them. He says: "Often, even the 'good times' were difficult. If I gave my wife a gift or took her somewhere nice for a weekend, she would break down crying, remembering that her daughter did not share our happiness."

Are such Christians overreacting? Not necessarily. In fact, they may to some extent be reflecting the qualities of Jehovah, in whose image man was made. (Genesis 1:26, 27) What does this mean? Well, how did Jehovah feel when his people Israel rebelled



against him? From Psalm 78:38-41, we learn that Jehovah was hurt and pained. Yet, he patiently warned and disciplined them, forgiving them time and again upon their demonstrating repentance. Obviously, Jehovah feels a personal attachment to his creatures, 'the work of his hands,' and does not easily give up on them. (Job 14:15; Jonah 4:10, 11) He implanted in humans the capacity for

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having similar loyal attachments, and the bond between family members can be especially strong. So it is not surprising that humans would grieve over the spiritual loss of a beloved relative.

Indeed, the spiritual loss of a loved one is among the most difficult of trials that come upon true worshippers. (Acts 14:22) Jesus said that accepting his message would cause division in some families. (Matthew 10:34-38) This is not because the Bible message of itself causes family division. Rather, unbelieving or unfaithful family members cause a rift by rejecting, abandoning, or even opposing the way of Christianity. We can be thankful, however, that Jehovah does not leave his faithful ones without a means of coping with the trials that beset them. If you are presently sorrowing over the spiritual loss of a loved one, what Bible principles can help you endure the grief and find a measure of joy and contentment?

#### Coping

*"By building up yourselves . . . , keep yourselves in God's love."* (Jude 20, 21) Depending on your particular circumstances, it may be that there is nothing you can do at this time to help a family member who has stopped serving Jehovah. Nevertheless, you can and should build up yourself as well as any remaining faithful family members. Veronica, who saw two of her three sons leave the truth, says: "My husband and I were reminded that if we remain in a strong spiritual state, we will be in the best condition to welcome back our sons when they come to their senses. Where would the prodigal son have been if his father had not been in a condition to receive him back?"

To keep yourself in a strong condition, be absorbed in spiritual activities. This would include maintaining a schedule for deep Bible study and attending Christian meetings.

### How to Cope

- ◆ "By building up yourselves . . . , keep yourselves in God's love."—Jude 20, 21.
- ◆ Do not give up hope.—1 Corinthians 13:7.
- ◆ Resist self-blame.—Ezekiel 18:20.
- ◆ Be patient with others.—Colossians 3:13.
- ◆ Respect Jehovah's arrangement for discipline.—Hebrews 12:11.
- ◆ Express your feelings.—Psalm 62:7, 8.

Make yourself available to help others in the congregation to the extent that your circumstances allow. True, initially you may find such activities difficult. Veronica recalls: "My first instinct was to isolate myself like a wounded animal. But my husband insisted on our keeping a good spiritual routine. He made sure that we went to the meetings. When it was time to attend a convention, I needed a lot of courage to go and face people. Yet, the program drew us closer to Jehovah. Our son who had remained faithful was particularly built up by that convention."

Maria, mentioned earlier, finds it especially helpful to stay busy in the field ministry and is presently helping four persons to learn about the Bible. Similarly, Laura says: "Although I still cry daily, I thank Jehovah that even if I have not had the success that some parents have had in raising children, I do have the Bible's perfect message, which is able to help families in these last days." Ken and Eleanor, whose adult children left the congregation, arranged their circumstances to move to an area where there is a greater need for Kingdom publishers and to pursue the full-time ministry. This has helped them



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keep matters in perspective and avoid being swallowed up by sorrow.

*Do not give up hope.* Love “hopes all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:7) Ken, mentioned above, says: “When our children left the way of the truth, I thought that it was like their death. But after my sister died, my view changed. I am grateful that my children are not literally dead and that Jehovah continues to leave the way open for them to return to him.” Indeed, experience has shown that many who have left the truth eventually do return.—Luke 15:11-24.

*Resist self-blame.* Parents especially may tend to look back and regret that they did not handle certain situations differently. However, the main thought conveyed at Ezekiel 18:20 is that Jehovah holds the sinner, not his parents, responsible for his wrong choice. Interestingly, while the book of Proverbs makes many comments about the parents’ obligation to bring up their children in the right way, it contains over four times as much counsel for young ones to listen to and obey their parents. Yes, children have the responsibility to respond to the Bible-based training of their imperfect parents. You likely handled matters as well as you could at the time. Still, even if you feel that you made certain mistakes and that these were indeed your fault, that does not necessarily mean that your mistakes caused your loved one to

leave the truth. At any rate, there is nothing to be gained by indulging in “if onlys.” Learn from your mistakes, determine not to repeat them, and pray to Jehovah for forgiveness. (Psalm 103:8-14; Isaiah 55:7) Then look to the future, not the past.

*Be patient with others.* It may be hard for some to know just how to encourage or comfort you, especially if they have never had a similar experience. Besides, people differ as to what they consider encouraging and comforting. So if some say things that upset you, apply the apostle Paul’s counsel found at Colossians 3:13: “Continue putting up with one another and forgiving one another freely if anyone has a cause for complaint against another.”

*Respect Jehovah’s arrangement for discipline.* If your relative has received discipline from the congregation, remember that this is part of Jehovah’s arrangement and is in the best interests of all, including the wrongdoer. (Hebrews 12:11) Therefore, resist any inclination to find fault with the elders who were involved or the decisions they made. Remember, the best results come from doing things Jehovah’s way, whereas opposing Jehovah’s arrangements can only result in added distress.

After Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, Moses regularly served as judge. (Exodus 18:13-16) Since a judgment in favor of one individual would probably have been against another, it is not hard to imagine that some were disappointed by Moses’ decisions. Finding fault with Moses’ judgments perhaps contributed to some instances of rebellion against his leadership. However, Jehovah was using Moses to lead His people, and He punished, not Moses, but the rebels and their families who supported them. (Numbers 16:31-35) We can learn from this by striving to respect and cooperate with deci-

### IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

Are We Living in “the Last Days”?

“They Called Together the Sanhedrin”

“Rejoice With the Wife of Your Youth”



If so, whatever your relationship with Jehovah and the prospects ahead, perhaps you intend to pursue the right path. You are putting the right time on your side, the story

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## Have You Left Jehovah?

If so, whatever the reason, your relationship with Jehovah and your eternal prospects are at risk. Perhaps you intend to return to Jehovah. Are you vigorously pursuing this now? Or are you putting it off until "the right time"? Remember, the storm clouds of

Armageddon are swiftly approaching. Moreover, life in this system is short and uncertain. You cannot know if you will even be alive tomorrow. (Psalm 102:3; James 4:13, 14) One man who was diagnosed with a terminal illness said: "This illness caught me serving Jehovah

full-time, with no skeletons in my closet. And that's a good feeling to have right now." Imagine, though, how he would have felt if his illness had caught him saying, "Someday, I will return to Jehovah!" If you have left Jehovah, now is the best time to return.

sions made by those with theocratic authority today.

In this regard, Delores recalls how difficult it was for her to maintain a balanced view when her daughter was disciplined by the congregation. "What helped me," she says, "was to read over and over again articles dealing with the reasonableness of Jehovah's arrangements. I made a special notebook of points from talks and articles that would help me to bear up and carry on." This leads to another important means of coping.

*Express your feelings.* You may find it helpful to confide in one or two understanding friends who have your trust. In doing so, select friends who will help you to maintain a positive attitude. It will certainly be most effective to "pour out your heart" in prayer to Jehovah.\* (Psalm 62:7, 8) Why? Because he

\* Regarding praying in behalf of a disfellowshipped relative, see *The Watchtower*, December 1, 2001, pages 30-1.

fully understands the depth of what you are feeling. For example, you may feel that it is unfair that you should have to experience such emotional anguish. After all, *you* did not leave Jehovah. Commit your feelings to Jehovah, and ask him to help you view the situation in a less painful way.—Psalm 37:5.

With the passing of time, you will likely be better able to manage your feelings. Meanwhile, do not give up in your efforts to be pleasing to your heavenly Father, and never feel that these are in vain. (Galatians 6:9) Remember, if we were to leave Jehovah, we would still have problems. On the other hand, by remaining loyal to him, we have his help with the trials we face. Be assured, then, that Jehovah appreciates the magnitude of your situation and will continue to give you needed strength at the right time.—2 Corinthians 4:7; Philippians 4:13; Hebrews 4:16.