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Getting Out and Getting On Dealing with the Grief Process Experienced in Exiting a Cult

by G. Richard Fisher

Life itself can be extremely difficult. Loss and grief are components in the life of every person. Dealing with these can be very problematic. After all, life is loss.

God has given us much in the Scriptures to help us build a theology of suffering. Without this information we can be caught on a greasy slope of despair.

Acquaintance with Romans 8, the books of Job and Lamentations all help us acquire resources for the inevitable losses of life. We should study well Romans 8, even committing portions of it to memory. It will serve us well in our struggles and equip us to help others. Both Job and Lamentations should become familiar to us as well.

In the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul deals in stark realism with, "the sufferings of this present time" (v. 18). He reminds us that all of creation, saved as well as unsaved, is struggling with the stresses of life and the fall: "For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs until now" (v. 22). In all of the psychobabble of today's culture, we



must keep reminding ourselves that there is no commandment in the Bible that says: "Thou must always feel good!" Until resurrection and glorification there will always be groans and pains.

A big part of the suffering of the present time is loss. *Life brings loss.* Loss is an inevitable part of life and when we lose *we grieve.* Therefore grief is an inevitable part of life as well. Think of the losses:

- The loss can be a loss through the death of a loved one.
 - The loss can be the loss of a marriage through a divorce.
 - It can be a lost friend or the loss and rejection of a wayward child.
 - It can be the loss of a long held job.
 - It can be the loss of health or of the younger self.

Life brings losses — devastating losses, crippling losses and again, *when we lose we grieve.*

A good definition of grief and its effects are given by Dr. Jay Adams:


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 36. *Ibid.*
 37. *Ibid.*, pg. 87.
 38. *Ibid.*, pg. 105.
 39. *Toronto Globe and Mail's Fanfare* magazine, Feb. 15, 1978, pg. 11.
 40. See *Good Morning, Holy Spirit*, op. cit.,

pg. 28 and *Toronto Globe and Mail*, Dec. 25, 1976.
 41. *Christianity Today*, Oct. 5, 1992, pg. 54.
 42. *He Touched Me*, op. cit., pg. 48.
 43. *Ibid.*, pg. 49, italics in original.
 44. Benny Hinn Testimony, July 19, 1987, op. cit.
 45. *He Touched Me*, op. cit., pp. 50-51.
 46. *Ibid.*, pg. 120.
 47. Benny Hinn sermon, *Double Portion Anointing*, Part #3, Orlando Christian Center, Orlando, Fla., April 7, 1991. From the series, *Holy Ghost Invasion*. TV#309, tape

on file.
 48. Benny Hinn, *This Is Your Day*, June 11, 1997, tape on file.
 49. *He Touched Me*, op. cit., pg. 169.
 50. *Ibid.*
 51. Benny Hinn Miracle Crusade highlights, Trinity Broadcasting Network, date unknown, tape on file, emphasis added.
 52. *He Touched Me*, op. cit., pg. 196.
 53. Benny Hinn, *This Is Your Day*, Nov. 12, 1998, tape on file.
 54. *He Touched Me*, op. cit., pg. 196. 

GETTING OUT

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"Grief may be called a *life-shaking sorrow over loss*. Grief tears life to shreds; it shakes one from top to bottom. It pulls him loose; he comes apart at the seams. Grief is truly nothing less than a life-shattering loss."¹

That life-shattering sorrow called grief, we must not forget, has the power to enslave if not handled properly.

How about that person who gives his life to a cult? That individual gives himself or herself to an illusion, a delusion, perhaps for years. They stake their eternity on the group and its teachings. However, when they attempt to break free, there can be a painful and even excruciating awareness of major losses. Major grief may set in and that person has to begin the long hard process of dealing with that grief. The old spiritual says: "It's not an easy road." At times we may feel that is an understatement.

The first thing that needs to be established is:

THE FACT OF GRIEF IN EXITING

What a strange phenomenon in Numbers 11 that when the going got rough (in the wilderness) the people of God cried out to go back into the bondage of Egypt. It was a case of selective memory and having to feel good. Sometimes the comfort of the known feels better than the fear of the unknown, even if that known has many downsides. It takes courage and

grace to traverse a wilderness. Risks of faith are difficult and scary. Trust and obedience often have to work in the absence of feelings or even against feelings.

Think about what has been lost in the years of cult involvement and investment. In some cases:

- The loss of years of time.
- The loss of family and friends.
- The loss of large amounts of money.

Loss, loss, loss. In other cases:

- The loss of morality.
- The loss of children.
- The loss of a spouse.

More loss. And in other cases:

- An entire family lost with the agony of "we helped mislead them" and feeling totally ashamed for being so stupid or so ignorant.

And finally, in extreme cases:

- The loss of an identity surrendered to the organization.
- The loss of an entire lifetime.
- The loss of a social life and social skills.
- The loss of an education and now no job skills.
- The loss of a desire to ever trust again.
- The loss of all hope.

Written in large letters over the exiting cult member is the word LOSS. A good book title would be: *The Scarlet L*.

So it is not only doctrinal issues that we *must* deal with but heart, soul and

emotions that are delicate and maybe even broken. Thank God we have a Savior who "heals the broken-hearted" (Luke 4:18). The doctrinal issues must be woven into the practical issues of life and living. Position in Christ for instance gives great encouragement and morale to a floundering ex-cultist.

If the exiting cult member is genuinely saved, he or she has God's grace, God's Spirit and God's promises. On a human level he needs skillful, caring, biblical, grief helpers. He needs real support to learn to apply the means of grace.

If he is saved, it is not that he does not have joy and gratitude for salvation and for the Savior but that he is a complex being who experiences conflicts, emotions and a range of ups and downs from the grief process triggered by the losses. We can see in the Psalms the wide range of emotions and emotional turmoil triggered by the stresses of life. We must be keenly aware and sensitive to the *fact of grief in exiting*.

Second, we must think about:

THE FACES OF GRIEF

What does grief look like? What are we dealing with? What do we experience when loss triggers grief? What kind of terrain does grief offer us? If we know the many faces of grief, it will aid us in processing our own grief and in helping others process theirs.

The book of Lamentations is only five chapters. Yet, it is a book that deals with acute, devastating and

catastrophic loss. Jeremiah sits in the rubble of his beloved but destroyed city — Jerusalem. He has lost his city, many friends, his occupation, his house of worship, probably many relatives. The Babylonians have taken everything away and left the unemployed prophet sitting in ashes. In the last two years of the siege of Jerusalem by Babylon, the residents of the city had been reduced to a diet of weeds and grass. The excavations in Area G of Jerusalem revealed that the instances of pin worms and tape worms had increased tenfold during the siege years. The horrific reverberations are hard for us to grasp. And that was only the beginning.

The excruciating grief drips off of every chapter of Lamentations. This book, along with Job, becomes the model and textbook for grief counseling. I have never come across anyone to date who has expounded this book for that purpose, so here is a good project awaiting someone.

In Lamentations his loss is coupled with loneliness, and compared to widowhood and slavery (1:1). Crying, tears, absence of comfort, affliction, unrest, dire straits, are the words used in chapters 1-3. In 1:12, Jeremiah says it feels as though God has maliciously inflicted this sorrow on him. All perspective is gone. The loss of comfort is a recurring theme (1:2, 9, 17, 21).

So there are definite, traceable emotions and experiences that we cycle through, again and again, as we process grief. We can find these not only in Lamentations and Job but in parts of Psalms and other Scripture. For the sake of clarity I will try to catalog and describe the major components of the face of grief. In isolating each, we must remember that it is not as clear cut and simplistic as a list but that the elements swirl and overlap often.²

1. *Shock and emotional upheaval.* Hearing of the death of His friend Lazarus, John 11:35 tells us: "Jesus wept." There are tears of grief found in Scripture in Genesis 23:2, 2 Samuel 18:33 and Acts 8:2. Paul did not say it was wrong to sorrow but rather that

we sorrow in hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). The world has a hopeless sorrow that leads them to despair. So tears may come unsought and unexpected. As the tears fall, we can affirm that God cares and understands.

Though tears are mentioned 35 times in the Bible, the Psalmist reminds us that: "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy" (Psalm 126:5).

2. *Pangs of guilt.* There can be the tendency in difficult times to idolize the cult and to selectively remember some of the comforts experienced in the group. This can exaggerate the bad points of the one grieving, filling them with a sense of guilt. Since cults often operate by guilt manipulation, it is easy for one exiting to take on even more guilt as old wounds and old memories surface.

When the guilt strikes, there is the tendency to agonize and wonder, "Am I the one who is wrong? If I am right in this why do I feel so miserable? Look how happy they all seem." The ex-cultist had always been willing to take the blame while in the cult, so why not now?

Imagine if health problems begin after exiting the cult — problems that would have occurred anyway. The person begins to second-guess himself and it is easy for him to believe that what is occurring is punishment or chastisement from God.

3. *Disorienting fear.* Sleep loss may accelerate this. If a person is not thinking clearly, panic can set in. Extended sleep deprivation can cause hallucinations, voices and "visions." Cultists are taught to be afraid of anyone and anything outside the cult. Therefore, who can be trusted?

Perhaps as the person is misunderstood by the untaught, it only leads to more fear. Perhaps there are the old "tapes" playing in the head of the ex-cultist and he is overwhelmed by fear of retaliation by the leader or leaders or even God Himself. If the person has been browbeaten and constantly told: "You are wrong — you are wrong." Then no matter what they think, they are wrong. Not able to think biblically yet they may

believe and rehearse lies (Philippians 4:6-9).

4. *Crippling depression.* It may be the fear or the guilt or the confusion that triggers the depression. When a person is alone with their thoughts and for years have had a negative mindset he may easily believe, "No one cares" or "What's the use of trying" or "When will I ever level out" or "Maybe they were right after all."

With feelings of security gone and many relationships shattered, it may add to gloom and doom. Jeremiah cried out, "My soul sinks within me" (Lamentations 3:20). Given the right dynamics anyone can be prone to depression although we do not have to give into it or wallow in it. At any low time of life we must get one foot in front of the other and live to please God, not give in to feelings.

5. *Irrational anger.* The emotion (the inner feeling) of anger is not necessarily sin (Ephesians 4:26). If those emotions are vented in outbursts and verbal abuse, it is sinful (v. 29). When negative feelings rise in regard to the deception and misleading of the cult it can issue out in deep resentment, feelings of revenge and rage. This all becomes a confusing part of our hurt feelings and frustrations.

Hostility can be sinfully directed at self or others in close range and even toward God. The sinful manifestations of anger, either with exploding or burying the emotions, can cause even more guilt and complicating problems. We may feel justified in our angry responses since "Look at what they did to me" sounds like logical rationale. Prayer for one's enemies, as well as patience, must be practiced. Pouring oneself into study efforts and learning effective ways to reach others in the old system is a far more positive and biblical response.

6. *Numbing apathy.* One can give up the hostile feelings and shift into not caring. Thoughts of "No one understands what I have been through so why bother" begin to sound reasonable. The inner pain can trigger thoughts of: "I just want to be left alone." The grieving person can withdraw not wanting to relate to the

world. They may try to shelter themselves from more letdowns and disappointments. They have had drilled into them that churches are bad and they don't want the difficulty of trying to negotiate with a new people that they may not be able to trust. Aloneness feels safer — for now. If this continues too long it can be deadly and dangerous.

7. *Unchallenged bitterness.* We can nurse our wounds to such a degree that we fall into prolonged bitterness. In Mark Ammerman's novel, *The Rain from God*, the old Indian woman, Silvermoon, describes how she entertained and coddled her anger. We could substitute the word bitterness in the place of anger:

"I chewed on the meat of my anger for many seasons until only the bones remained. Then I sucked on the bones until even the taste of the meat was gone. Then I carried the bones about in a bag which rattled your name whenever I walked. Then I lay them near my bed and saw them only when I slept or when I woke. Then I arose one morning and looked upon the sad, dry bones, and I wondered at my foolishness."³

When we chew on bitterness, we are the ones poisoned. When we carry bags of bitterness we are the ones worn out. Entertaining bitterness is foolish and sinful. We are commanded in the New Testament to "put away bitterness" (Ephesians 4:31).

Bitterness may knock at the door but we do not have to invite it in. It may call us but we can refuse to respond. It may poke its head in the entrance but we do not have to entertain and feed it. It may peek in the window but we must pull the shade. Far better to shun the bait than struggle in the snare.

8. *Healthy adjustment.* This is where the person latches on to all the help he can get and accepts the loss and begins to rearrange his life. He is able now to cope with the roller-coaster ride as the curves come less often and the drops are not as steep. He is

getting on with his life. The above cycle (points 1-7) may occur from time to time but with less ferocity and the person understands what is happening and stays on course, operating by principle, priority and planning — not feeling. People in good adjustment no longer feel a need to vent hostility or bury rage but are now seeking ways to be a blessing to others.

It must be emphasized that getting to adjustment *may take months for some and years for others.* Everyone is different and we must take people where we find them, not beat them down for not getting in a groove of our imaginary timetable. Their "work" is not easy and neither is the "work" of those who minister to them. The Puritans said "grief is hard work."

The third big point is:

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF GRIEF COUNSELING

We all have seen on various Justice buildings the lady with the blindfold and the scales. As we picture the scale and think of all the weight of grief on one side, what is it that can possibly balance the scale? Grief causes our lives to plummet down out of balance and it is not as simple as saying, "Just get rid of the grief." It seems stuck to the scale. We need a balancing factor on the other side to stabilize and balance out our lives.

There is something very significant in Lamentations. It is a key for us as we process our losses and assist others in theirs. Lamentations 1:2,9,16,17,21 all have as their common theme the word comfort. Jeremiah says that what he needs more than anything else to balance his grief is comfort. He cries out for comfort.

The biblical answer then is *comfort*. As we turn to 2 Corinthians 1:3, we find that God is called the "God of all comfort." In verse 4 Paul says God will "comfort us." The English word comfort means to fortify or strengthen. I need large heaps of comfort on the other side of the scale. The Greek word for comfort (*paraklesi*) means encouragement, consolation and the alleviation of grief, to soothe.⁴

Remember also that the precious Holy Spirit is called the "Comforter."

Life need not be totally out of balance under the burden if I can get hold of resources to strengthen and fortify me. If sorrow, loss and grief are an inevitable part of life — how can I negotiate through it all? How can I balance the scale?

The larger question however is: "How can I get the comfort and how do I minister to others?"

Realizing that so many get stuck in grief, what can I tell them to help move them on and to help them mature spiritually? What can I give them to balance the scale? We must know the resources God has given us for comfort. I would suggest at least three.

A. **Commitment to Christ.** In 2 Corinthians 1:2-3, Paul reminds us of the grace, peace and comfort that comes from the Father and Jesus Christ. To experience these things we have to have a personal union with Jesus — that is be vitally linked to Him. We must receive Christ (John 1:12) and not just some idea of Christ.

To have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ means we are eternally united to the one who is the God-man, born of a virgin, dying and then rising in a glorified body. The one in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Colossians 2:9). To know Him in a personal way is to have life eternal.

The God of all comfort will give comfort to His children. He will give comfort for every aspect of grief. God wants to comfort us and it is in relationship to our knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior.

We are further assured by Scripture in 2 Corinthians 1:4-5 that God comforts us not just to make us comfortable but that *we might be comforters*. We are assured in these verses that whatever has happened or is happening, God will use it for our greater training. It fleshes out a bit more of Romans 8:28.

Marilyn Heavilin lost three children but she assures us:

“Friend, don’t give up. As you go through this December of your life, God is willing to walk beside you. He understands when you have hard days; He understands you are grieving because of the terrible loss you’ve suffered. Look around you and see the roses: the friend who is standing with you, the memories of your loved one, the Scripture God has given you, the kindnesses others have offered, the work God is doing in your heart. Gather those roses, and let their refreshing aroma fill your life with a confidence that Jesus hears and cares about you.”⁵

Her union with and faith in Jesus brought her through and gave her great comfort in her losses.

Ex-cultists, disillusioned by the cult, will only become cynical without Christ. They will exchange one bondage for another. John 8:36 reminds us that, “Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”

B. Commitment to the Word of God. God’s Word is an incredible source of comfort. In Romans 15:4, we are instructed: “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and *comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.*” The grieving Christian *must* stay in the Word. Remember John 8:32 says: “the truth shall make you free” and Romans 10:17 assures us that faith comes by the Word of God. Both comfort and faith are ministered in the pages of Scripture. Satan will do everything in his power to keep us from it.

The grieving Christian cannot live on feelings. As well, we do not live on explanations — we live on promises! Grieving, Jeremiah remembered and called to mind God’s mercies and promises and in this found hope (Lamentations 3:21-26).

Here is how it works:

You face a day where you feel weak. You feel extremely vulnerable and have no strength. Then you turn to Isaiah 40 and your eyes land on verses 29-31:

“He gives power to the weak,
And to those who have no might
He increases strength. Even the
youths shall faint and be weary,
and the young men shall utterly
fall. But those who wait on the
Lord shall renew their strength;
They shall mount up with wings
like eagles. They shall run and
not be weary. They shall walk
and not faint.”

You take heart and realize that God is bigger than your weaknesses. Inner strength returns and the comfort of God floods your mind and soul.

You lay in bed at night, alone. All of a sudden you are hit with panic and fear. You are afraid. Then your mind turns to Isaiah 41:10:

“Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. Yes, I will help you. I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”

You realize and know that God is bigger than all your fears and that comfort banishes the fear.

You wake up feeling dry — spiritually dry. Inside you feel parched. You take your Bible and open to Isaiah 41:17-18 and read these words:

“The poor and needy seek water, but there is none. Their tongues fail for thirst. I, the Lord, will hear them. I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will open rivers in desolate heights and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water and the dry land springs of water.”

Though you know and recognize the primary interpretation and the Messianic and Kingdom overtones, there is a secondary application that ministers incredible comfort as you realize that God sees, knows and cares and is bigger than your driest experience. Hope is rekindled as the Holy Spirit restores your soul. You are reminded that you have the One called “the water of Life” living in you.

One evening there is an overwhelming sense of confusion. You have

never walked this way before. This experience is new terrain with no markers or sign post. It is a dark lonely road and you feel lost and disoriented. You don’t know what’s ahead. You have just never been this way before.

Looking for the comfort of the Scriptures, you continue in Isaiah reading up to 42:16 and you see these incredible words:

“I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them and crooked places straight. These things I will do for them and not forsake them.”

God knows the road and is bigger than our uncertainty.

When you feel disconnected and think you can’t go on, there is great comfort in Isaiah 43:1-2:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you.”

Go to the Word of God for comfort. The comfort of the Scriptures is God’s provision for hurting grieving people.

C. Commitment to a Healthy, Well-Balanced Fellowship of Believers. In short, stay attached to a local church in worship, fellowship and ministry. *You will prolong grief without fellowship.*

Though this may go against everything that was drilled into the one exiting, Hebrews 10:25 commands, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.” To be elitist, exclusive, or elusive is to be weak and deprived of comfort.

We often think of the Apostle Paul as a super-Christian. After all he was a church planter, missionary and the recipient of direct revelation. He wrote Scripture, did miracles, and made a trip to heaven. Surely he was

self-sufficient and in no great need of others. Wrong.

In spite of Paul's gifts and greatness he was very human and very vulnerable. He, at times, found life to be fearful, hard and even excruciating.

Listen to Paul's admissions in 2 Corinthians 7:5: "For indeed when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears."

Here Paul sounds just like us. How often we've said "I feel stressed — overextended — so much going on around me that is not right — everywhere I turn things are out of sorts — it troubles me inside — it upsets me inside!"

Paul needed comfort. How would he get it? Would it be a warm fuzzy feeling sent directly from God? Would it be a booming voice from heaven? Would it be a bolt that would strike him? Would he tingle from head to toe? How did God minister comfort to Paul?

The next verse gives the answer. The answer was *fellowship*. Plain and simple — fellowship. God sent a man:

"Nevertheless, God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus" (v. 6). Comfort was ministered through fellowship.

We can be a Titus to someone and we need a Titus or two around us. Even Paul did.

Black gospel musician Thomas Dorsey lost his wife and newborn son in 1932. Ministering in revival meetings in St. Louis, he received a telegram giving him the tragic news of their sudden death.

Stunned, broken, and torn by shattering grief there was born in his grieving heart the words of the wonderful hymn, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

"Precious Lord, take my hand,
lead me on, let me stand — I am
tired, I am weak, I am worn;
thro' the storm, thro' the night,
lead me on to the light — Take
my hand, precious Lord, lead me
home. When my way grows
drear, Precious Lord, linger near
— when my life is almost gone.
Hear my cry, hear my call, hold
my hand lest I fall — Take my
hand, precious Lord, lead me
home."⁶

He knew Christ, he knew the Word, and he spent his life being a Titus to God's people. Many of them were a Titus to him.

May the God of all grace and the God of all and every comfort, minister that grace and comfort to you through Christ, the Word and others. May you keep yourself in the way of grace and under the means of grace. May you in turn minister that grace and comfort as a Titus to others (Romans 15:14).

Endnotes:

1. Jay E. Adams, *The Big Umbrella*. Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972, pg. 66, italic in original.
2. Some of these elements can be found in Warren and David Wiersbe, *Comforting the Bereaved*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1985, pp. 22-23.
3. Mark Ammerman, *The Rain from God*. Camp Hill, Pa.: Horizon Books, 1997, pg. 268.
4. See further, W.E. Vine, *The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Publishers, 1984, pg. 199.
5. Marilyn Heavilin, *Roses in December*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1987, pg. 148.
6. Kenneth Osbeck, *Amazing Grace*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publishing, 1990, pg. 260.

EDITORIALS

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Jesus taking our place in hell as part of the Gospel message so clearly described by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

Meyer, by virtue of her redefined gospel, has moved herself onto a more critical playing field. She, like so many heretics and cultists, says God gave her this teaching apart from the Bible. She places herself beyond the authority of Scripture when she says, "The Bible can't even find any way to explain this. Not really. That's why you've got to get it by revelation. There are no words to explain what I'm telling you. I've got to just trust God that He's putting it into your spirit like He put it into mine" (*From the Cross to the Throne*, cassette tape).

Meyer's premise leads us to conclude that she believes that an infinitely wise, intelligent and omniscient God had trouble expressing His truth in Scripture and that she thinks she can better express those truths herself.

The Bible is clear in its proclamation of the Gospel. God was not at a loss for words, nor were the inspired authors of Scripture. Scripture is all we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else — it's just that simple. We do not need extrabiblical declarations stolen from heretical teachers.

Clearly, the reason Meyer appeals to "revelation knowledge" and not the Bible is because her doctrine is another Gospel. She has borne false witness against God by saying that He put this teaching into her spirit. Again, she finds herself on even more dangerous ground with such a claim. She has painted herself into a theological corner by claiming this teaching came directly from God. If it came by revelation from God and means our very salvation, as she says, it is a doctrine that must never be denied or ignored. If she ever moves to disclaim such teaching, then she has lied — to the utmost — in saying that God gave her the declaration by revelation. She is a false prophet.

When we allow ourselves to drift from God's Word alone, we open ourselves to be exposed to "destructive