

## **When Bad Things Happen,** **How to help your child manage the painful events of life.**

### **I. Intro.**

*Ecclesiastes 7:14 When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other.*

We, as parents, have the sometimes challenging task of helping our children negotiate the painful events of life. At times, we do not even know how to do that ourselves. This handout are the notes from a talk designed to speak to some truths for parents. If we parents understand them well, we will be able to communicate them to our children in the teachable life moments in just the way he or she needs.

What are “bad things”?

- “big” = death of loved ones, divorce, serious illnesses, serious handicaps, major losses, etc.
- “medium” = losses of pets/toys/friends/schools, betrayals, major disappointments, etc.
- “small” = bad experiences with friends, injustices, disappointments, wounds by others, failures, etc.

Note that what may seem “small” to someone else or an adult may feel very “big” to the person or child at the time.

### **II. Basic truths about bad things that happen:**

1. God made the world good. We were not intended for bad things.

- We were created for Eden/heaven. We were designed for a “world” of goodness, fellowship with God and the absence of pain, loss, and death.
- The world that God made was good. Creation reveals a God who is orderly, loves beauty, and makes all things work together in complicated and amazing ways.

*Gen. 1:31, James 1:17*

2. But bad things do happen now because of “the fall”. Life is difficult.

- We live in a world that is “fallen”. We have death, pain, loss and sin.

*John 16:33, Romans 8:18-27, Gen. 3:16-19*

- Bad things also happen because we have an enemy (Satan) who seeks to separate us from God and to cause us more pain.

*1 John 5:19-20, Eph. 6:11-12, 2 Thess. 3:3, John 17:11-18*

3. Therefore, we currently live in a world that has pain and loss.
  - There **will** be pain that is from:
    - unavoidable natural causes (death, illness, accidents, natural disasters)
    - avoidable natural causes (lack of protection, poor choices, ignorance)
    - the sin of others (directly or the consequences of)
    - our own sin (directly or the consequences of)
    - our own choosing for a greater good (“no pain, no gain”, training, discipline, preventive measures to avoid greater pain...)
  - Watch out for falsely believing that:
    - All pain should be avoided.
    - Pain can be avoided.
    - You can protect your child from bad things. You can control it all!
    - You should protect your child from all bad experiences.
4. We must accept the fact that life will have pain in order to manage it well. So we can:
  - Prevent avoidable pain.
    - vs. denial and lack of protective measures
  - Prepare for unavoidable pain.
    - vs. denial, fear
  - Learn to handle pain well with strength, courage, and endurance.
    - vs. weakness, avoidance of good things, discouragement, giving up, debilitating fear
  - Learn to grieve pain (loss) in healthy ways.

If we spend our energy focusing on avoiding all pain instead of managing pain well, we will be frustrated and angry.

You cannot avoid pain for yourself or your child. You **can** teach your child how to manage pain and be a better person because of it instead of damaged.

### **III. How we respond to bad things is more important than what happened.**

In other words: We are not damaged by what happens to us, but by how we view it.

A good view of a bad experience is to:

1. Understand it in light of God’s truths.
  - He is sovereign.
  - God cares about our pain. (See list at of scriptures at end of handout)
  - Someday there will be no more “bad things.” We are not home (in heaven) yet.  
*Rev. 21:1-4*
2. See oneself as stronger/better because of the situation.
  - how we handled the process well while we were in it
  - how we became a better person after the process
  - or how we became closer to God because of it

*Romans 5:3-5 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

3. Learn lessons for the future
  - “Wow, that was bad! Next time I will...”

#### **IV. What a healthy response looks like.**

A healthy response to the bad things that happen is to go through the stages of grief well. Your task as a parent is to help your child to go through these stages well and with an understanding about what is true about the situation.

Healthy processing of bad stuff = Face it, Feel it, Express it, Fix it, Accept it.

What does this look like practically?

1. Face it.
  - Don't deny that something bad has happened.
  - Believe your child that to him/her it is bad.
  - Don't minimize.
  - Don't pretend or make up lies to ease the pain.
  - Don't avoid the topic.
  - In other words, just let it *be* bad.
  - Remember, it's OK for our kids to go through bad things. They can be better people because of it.
2. Feel it.
  - Let your child feel whatever they feel.
    - This is hard because we want to fix their bad feelings. Instead, trust them to feel it and then move on in their own time. Don't rush the process. They will return to balance if you let them. Just listen and validate. Trust their ability to work themselves through it.
    - Don't try to talk them out of their feelings. This rarely works. They may conclude that they shouldn't feel this way because you can't handle it or don't approve of it, so they stuff their feelings and thus never process them well. Or they conclude that they can't trust their own gut and thus learn not to pay attention to their own feelings. If they don't stuff their feelings, they may instead exaggerate them in order to convince you that they are justified. When this happens, you end up in a power struggle about who is right (Drama Queen vs. Mr. No Big Deal).

- Control your own emotions
  - Stay calm. Try not to panic or lose control. Fear or anger may be the normal reaction for *you* to have in the situation, but if your response is emotionally strong, your child will have to control his/her own response until you are safe again. Let the child know that your feelings are not directed at him or her, but it is your own response to the bad thing that has happened.
  - You may have to delay your own feelings until your child is OK. Go on “function mode.”
  - Your child needs to know from you: “We’re going to handle this together and we’re all going to be OK.” Later, with someone else, you need to feel your own feelings in order to process it well for yourself.
  - Be aware of anger as one of the stages of *your* grief (the loss of your child’s innocence, your powerlessness, the loss of your ideal expectations, etc.).
  - Be careful not to blame the child or overreact to others who “should have” known or done something. Try to place blame appropriately where/if it belongs (and not to overreact because of your own anger/grief).

### 3. Express it.

- Don’t avoid the subject.
  - Not talking about bad things can imply many false concepts to the child. It implies that it is their fault, that what happened is not important, that you don’t care, that no one understands them, that they’re alone or that you can’t handle it.
  - Asking them not to tell others about it also creates false concepts. It asks them to hold a negative secret (which makes them feel ashamed). The child should be given permission to tell as much or as little of what happened to them to whomever they choose. Do teach them who might be trustworthy listeners (warn them of judgmental people, gossips, people who blame, people who minimize or don’t understand, curiosity seekers...).
  
- What *to* say...
  - Ask questions.
    - “Is this still bothering you?”
    - “Do you think about it much? When & where do you think about it?”
    - “What do you think about the most when you think about what happened?”
    - “Do you have any questions about...?”
    - “Have you told any of your friends? How did they respond? Did it make you feel better/worse?”
  - Respond with empathy to their feelings (Try to acknowledge instead of fix their feelings).
    - “How are you feeling about...?”
    - “Wow, that really must have hurt you.” (disappointed you, scared you, made you feel alone, worried you, made you angry, etc.)
    - “You really did feel \_\_\_ didn’t you?”
    - “I bet that was a tough thing to go through.”

- “ I’m so sorry that you had to go through that. I wish I could make it not hurt.”
- “ You must feel upset.”
- “If that happened to me, I might feel...Is that how it is with you or do you feel differently?” (You may need to help them put words to their feelings.)
- “I felt that way once when...” (Don’t do too much story telling unless they show interest.)
- “Thanks for sharing your feelings with me. I feel lucky that you trust me.”
- State your own thoughts, feelings and observations. State them as facts; don’t dump your emotions for your child to take care of you.
  - “I’m wondering how you’re doing since this happened.”
  - “I’m concerned that...”
  - “I’m worried about...but I know that God will help us work it out.”
  - “I’m still sad/angry about what happened to you, but I’ll be OK.”
- Frame the situation positively. Predict good outcomes.
  - “Something bad happened to you, but we can all handle it and we’ll be fine soon.”
  - “It may take awhile for you to get over being scared, but then you’ll be an even braver person because you’ll know you can handle tough things.”
  - “You may need to go through this tough time, but I know you can do it and I’ll be right along side.”
  - “I wonder what good things God could bring out of this situation.”
  - “Hm. Do you think God could do anything positive in your life because of this?”
  - “Pretty soon you’ll be the bravest kid I know...”
- Guide them to lessons that can be learned to avoid future pain.
  - (Note: Don’t be too quick to point out the bigger lessons in the bad event. Let them grieve first. Then, help *them* come up with the good lessons by asking questions.)
  - “Do you think you might want to do \_\_\_ differently next time?”
  - “That really hurt. I bet you won’t ever want to feel that way again.”
  - “Is there anything you could do differently so you never have to feel this again?”
  - “You’re starting to learn about...Let’s talk about what we can all do better to be safer in the future.”
- Build courage by reminding them of past successes.
  - “I know you can handle this. Remember when you...”
- Use the opportunity to praise your child.
  - “You knew just what to do in that emergency. You knew to...”
  - “I’m really proud of how well you are talking to the doctor/counselor/police about what happened.”
  - “You sure are doing a good job of handling such a hard thing.”
  - “I wish you had told me earlier so I could have protected you, but I’m really proud of you for telling me now. I know it was hard to tell, you did a brave thing...”

- “Way to go. You let yourself have a good cry. Did you know that crying can be good for you? I bet you’ll feel a lot better pretty soon.” (not whining, complaining or feeling sorry for yourself, but grief is good)
  - “You sure are brave/calm/strong.”
  - Point out good character development.
    - “You sure do seem to be getting braver. Last time you had that shot you cried.”
    - “I notice how courageous you are becoming.”
    - “You certainly seem to be developing endurance/patience/self-discipline.”
    - “You got over this a lot faster than last time.”
    - “What a great attitude you are having in a tough situation.”
    - “You seem to be learning to ask God for help in tough times.”
  - Avoid secret conversations about the child (that he/she is aware of you having).
    - For example, instead of suddenly changing the subject when the child walks in the room, say, “We were just talking about your accident again. We hope...”
4. Fix it.
- The idea here is that you fix whatever you *can* to mend the old pain or avoid future pain.
    - Examples might be writing letters, bringing flowers, doing something to help.
  - Taking actions helps build a sense of control over pain in life. It moves your child from feeling like a victim, to having a good sense of power in the situation. Even if the action only benefits others (wear a helmet so you don’t get hurt like me...) it is still very empowering.
  - No action or changes made can communicate that the bad thing is not important.
5. Accept it.
- Acceptance does not mean that you accept what happened as OK or good; it means that you accept it as a true, sad thing that happened in your life. You accept it as a fact.
  - What happened does not become who the child (or family) is, but something bad that happened but is now over. Everyone is now safe, stronger and going to be OK.
  - This stage will always feel loss or sadness, but there is no longer emotional turmoil over what happened. Ideally, you also believe that good can come out of it.

## **V. What does damage look like if you don’t handle bad things well?**

- Learning wrong lessons about yourself.
  - Such as, “I am bad.”
  - “I am alone.”
  - “I don’t deserve love.”
  - “I am inadequate.”
  - “I am insignificant.”
  - “I can’t trust people.”

- “I’m a failure.”
- “No one understands me.”
- “Bad things always happen to me.”
  
- Learning wrong truths about that situation, others, the world, or God.
  - Such as, “All dogs are bad.”
  - “The accident was my fault.”
  - “My mom can’t be trusted.”
  - “All men (women, doctors, adults, other races, etc.) are bad.”
  - “All friends will let me down.”
  - “Sooner or later everyone will leave/reject me.”
  - “God doesn’t care / doesn’t answer prayers.”
  - “God is cruel.” “God hates me.”
  
- Learning wrong strategies for avoiding pain based on the untruths about yourself/others/world/God.
  - Such as, being afraid in similar situations,
  - avoiding similar situations excessively,
  - limiting life choices because of fears,
  - being afraid to trust others,
  - being afraid to take risks,
  - not asking for help when needed,
  - giving up before trying things,
  - lacking personal confidence,
  - being overly dependent on others,
  - becoming hyper-vigilant in order to stay safe,
  - excessive worry,
  - depression, etc.

## **VI. Conclusions**

Children see the world through their parents’ eyes. We must frame for them the truths of scripture while loving them in the process of life’s difficulties.

Sometimes we need to prepare more personally by spending time with God and asking Him what is true about ourselves, our children, and our lives so that we can guide our children.

This can be fun and rewarding. Enjoy the process!

## **Scriptures about How God Responds to Your Pain?**

As you face difficulties in your life, it may be easy to be angry at God for allowing such things. But He is present and in control. These scriptures are to help you understand how God responds to your pain even while He is present and allowing it. Take your time to meditate on these or other scriptures and allow God Himself to meet you and speak with you about how He feels about you.

### **When you are hurt/sad:**

He grieves for your sorrows. *John 11, Isa 53:4-5*  
He sees and cares about your tears. He wipes the tears from your face.  
*Rev 21:3-4, Is. 25:8, Rev. 7:17, 2 Kings 20:5*  
He heals. *Ps 103:2-5 Ps 147:3*  
He comforts. *Matt 5:4, 2 Cor. 1:3-4*

### **When you are ashamed:**

He sees you as pure. *Heb 10:19-22*  
He lifts you up. *1 Sam 2:8, Psalm 3:3, Ps 146:8, 1 Pet 5:6*  
He sets you free from the things that ashamed you. *Rom 6:20-23*

### **When you are abused:**

He is angry. *Isa 10:1-4, Ps 72:4*  
He will avenge. *Matt 18:6-7, Mal 3:5*  
He sees it, hears it, knows it. *Ps 10:14-18, Ps 72:12-14*  
He protects the victims. *Ps 146:7-9, Psalm 103:6, Psalm 146:5-10, Ps 12:5*  
He hates wickedness and those who abuse the weak. *Ps 5:6, Ps 11:5-6, Ps 37:32-34, Luke 17:1-2*

### **When you are alone:**

He is with you. *Ps 146:9*  
He is your friend. *John 15:14-1,5 James 2:*  
He is your family. He is the father to the fatherless. He is the husband to the husbandless.  
*Ps 68:5-6, Isa 54:1,4-6, Matt 12:49-50*

### **When you are afraid:**

God is stronger than your enemies. *Ps 27:1, Isa 41:10-13*  
He fights for you. *2 Chr 20:15*  
He knows your danger, and you are valuable to Him. *Matt 10:28-31*  
God is with you (and He is God). *Ps 23:4, Rev 1:17-18, Ps 118:6-7*  
God helps you. *Heb 13:6, Ps 91:14-16, 2 Tim 1:7*  
He gives you what you need. *Luke 12:32, 1 Pet 5:7*  
He gives you peace, even when you are in danger. *John 14:27, Prov 3:21-26, Psalm 23*

### **When you are helpless:**

He chose you, called you, and died for you. *1 Cor 1:27-29 Rom 5:6,*  
*Rom 8:22-39 (God knows you and helps you in weakness. He calls you. He works for your good.*  
*Nothing can separate you from Him. You are a conqueror through Him.)*  
He works through your weakness. *2 Cor 13:4, 2 Cor 12:10, Phil 4:13*  
He strengthens you like a shepherd caring for his sheep. *Ezek 34:15-16*  
He is strong for you. *Isa 40:28-29*

### **When you are tired:**

He gives you rest. *Ps 4:8, Psalm 3:5-6, Matt 11:28-30*  
He watches over you while you sleep. *Psalm 121, Ps 127:1-2*

### **When you are sinful:**

He chose you and died for your sins. *Rom 5:8*  
He forgives. *Luke 7:37-48, Isa 1:18, Jer 33:8, Ps 103:8-12*  
He is not surprised. *Ps 103:13-14, Rom 5:8*  
He pursues you even when you are rebellious. *Luke 15, Rev 3:17-20*  
He restores you when you repent. *2 Chr 30:9*

### **When you make poor choices:**

He knows your weaknesses and loves/called you anyway. *Ps 145:14, 2 Cor 12:9-10*  
He restores your losses. *Joel 2:25-27*