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No Parent Can Prevent Suffering Raising Children Through Pain and Loss



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Someone once observed that being a parent is like watching your heart walk around outside your body. When our kids scrape their knees, bump their heads, or break their bones, *our* hearts break. When others make fun of them, let them down, or break their hearts, *our* hearts break. As much as we'd like to shield our kids — and thus our own hearts — from pain and suffering, we can't.

That means that when our children suffer, we fight the fight of faith on two fronts. Parenting involves battling our own attitudes of unbelief that arise when our children suffer — attitudes like fear, worry, anxiety, despair, or discontentment. And parenting also means training our children to battle *their* attitudes of unbelief, which surface when they suffer.

In all of this, there is hope because, as the apostle Peter declares, “the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” ([Acts 2:39](#)).

Our Twin Boys

New Book from John Piper: [Coronavirus and Christ](#)

When our twin boys were born with a severe neuromuscular disorder, I was primarily aware of my own suffering. I wasn't the one connected to a ventilator or confined to a wheelchair, but I had to deal with my own grief and fear and envy by clinging to Christ.

As our remaining son has matured (his twin passed away when he was 3), I still have to preach the gospel to myself daily, but I also have to disciple him through his experience of suffering. He is the one whose muscles don't work, who struggles to breath, who has brittle bones and has suffered numerous femur fractures. He knows physical discomfort and pain in a way I never have.

But I do know that enfleshed in that frail body is a human soul created to enjoy God, but fallen in Adam. By God's grace, I know that Christ alone can save and satisfy his soul, so I know where to lead him. Whether our kids fear a bully at school or a procedure at the hospital, whether they suffer rejection or cancer, God's word has everything their souls ultimately need ([2 Timothy 3:16](#)). And God supplies all we finally need for all of life by making himself known to us and giving us his precious and very great promises ([2 Peter 1:3-4](#)).

Promise Is for You

Discipling our kids starts with trusting God ourselves. God calls parents to teach his word *diligently* to our children, to talk about his commands and promises in the everyday stuff of life ([Deuteronomy 6:4-6](#)), which means we have to know what God says *and* we have to take him at his word. If we're not trusting and treasuring Jesus when we suffer, how will we help our children learn to trust him?

As we cling to Christ, the refrain of *'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus* becomes our witness to our children:

Jesus, Jesus, how I trust him!

How I've proved him o'er and o'er.

By trusting Jesus ourselves, we prove his character and faithfulness, and we commend his glory and goodness to our children. And the more familiar we are with leading our hearts through the process of repentance and faith — taking captive unbelieving thoughts and submitting our minds to Christ, rejecting the idols of our hearts in favor of satisfaction in Christ alone — the more competent we will be to comfort and disciple our children when they suffer.

And for Your Children

The fact that God's promises are also "for your children and for all who are far off" ([Acts 2:39](#)), assures us that God's promises are true in all places and at all times. While different denominations disagree about what [Acts 2:39](#) implies about baptism, we all agree that we want our children to know and trust the precious promises that God makes to his people.

We want them to know God as the covenant-keeping God who guarantees his promises with an oath, and who stakes his own glory and renown on fulfilling his word ([Hebrews 6:13-18](#)). We want our kids to share in the faith that our father Abraham had, the kind of faith that trusts God to do what he promises ([Romans 4:12, 20-21](#)).

In our house, we do this by teaching our son specific promises from God that address his cares and concerns. When he is anxious, afraid, or sad, we loosely follow John Piper's acronym [APTAT](#): we assure him that God knows how he feels and encourage him to *admit* his need to God; we *pray* together for God's help; we *trust* a specific promise together; then, we *act*, which may mean facing a trach-change, a lab-draw, an x-ray, or some other scary or painful situation; finally, we *thank* God for his help.

Distress and Groceries

Since living by faith hinges on actually knowing and trusting what God says, we give our son promises for every situation. We start most days with [Psalm 118:24](#): “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” This beckons us to consciously seek our joy in the God who rules our days rather than in the circumstances of our days.

Because our son’s body is so weak, everyday activities can be a source of anxiety for him. One day, on our way to the grocery store, we heard him say from the back of our van (through his eye-gaze computer), “Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free” ([Psalm 118:5](#)). My wife and I laughed out loud, partly because most people wouldn’t think of the grocery store as a distressing situation, and partly from sheer joy that he thought to call upon the Lord at such a time.

Do You Believe This?

We regularly return to [Joshua 1:9](#): “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” This is exactly what his suffering heart needs — and exactly what this aching father’s heart needs.

The comfort of knowing that God is with him wherever he goes is vastly superior to the distraction of a balloon from the hospital giftshop. We don’t have anything against balloons or giftshops, but we recognize how tempting it can be to offer cheap consolations instead of the transcendent peace that comes from Christ alone.

Our son lost his twin brother four years ago. Now that he is 7, he has lots of questions about death and a greater awareness of his own mortality. So, we turn to Jesus and all that he promises by reciting [John 11:25–26](#): “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” He nods his head as I reply with Martha’s words, “Yes, Lord, [we] believe.”

And *that* is our greatest longing as parents — not to keep our children from ever suffering, but to teach them to trust Jesus when they suffer. And we do that by trusting Jesus together as we endure suffering together.