

FACING AND FEELING HARD THINGS

“In the end, when people of faith express their pain or suffering through lament, they are honestly and fearlessly placing their distress at the feet of God and awaiting God’s response.”

— Judy Thomson

Some of us have childhood memories that echo the story of “Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.” Judith Viorst’s beloved children’s book gives a step-by-step account of the worst possible day in the history of the world and how Alexander chose to address his endless catastrophes. **Did you have childhood days like that, when you thought, “Life is just really, really hard”?**

Reasons to lament come early in life, though we probably called it something else. Early in life, children need to be nurtured to use spiritual practices in hard times. We can help them by recovering the biblical tradition of lament to bring them into God’s presence.

Lament isn’t about the *happy at the end* of the story. Lament is about the *reassurance within the trouble* of the story. Lamenting is living through the hard things *with* God. Lament is what happens when we ask, “Why?” and don’t get an answer. **It is never too early to learn that it’s not our role to explain what is happening or why. Our role is to lament — to face the hard and to feel the hard — when we cannot explain.** We do children no favors when we cultivate the lie that life is always going to be easy, sunny and happy. They will all face days of lament, much like Alexander endured.



It has been said that the worst children’s song ever written had these lyrics: “*I’m in-right, out-right, up-right, down-right happy all the time ... Since Jesus Christ came in and cleansed my heart from sin, I’m in-right, out-right, up-right, down-right happy all the time.*” That is bad theology, plain and simple. Jesus never promised that being God’s child would be easy or constantly free from disappointments. We do not live in “happy all the time” days, and we need to help children know they are welcomed by God in not-so-happy times.

“Alexander days” — times when we face disappointment, sorrow, loss, and betrayal — are days when we need God’s loving nearness in special ways. **If we cause children to avoid hard times and sad feelings, we deprive them of knowing wonderful facets of God’s love. We deprive them of knowing God.** We don’t want our children to miss the transformational work God will do during times of lament. And we must help them practice for the future.

Lamenting is feeling what God feels. In Genesis, God was grieved over the sins of his people. Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend. Scripture tells us that the Spirit of God laments (groans) within us. Prayers of sorrow and stories of grief fill the Scriptures. There is a whole Old Testament book named Lamentations.

When we face and feel hard things, God wants us to cry out to him. Psalm 6:2 tells us, “Be gracious to me, LORD, for I am languishing; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.” Whenever God’s people face hard things and feel hard things, God is always present, aware, and at work.

Alexander planned to move to Australia to avoid lamentation life. We can invite children to a better remedy than that. **God wants to live closely with us in days that are hard. He will show himself to be enough — bigger than the hard things. Our children need to have this confidence early in life.**

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INVITATIONS TO ENGAGE

Start the conversation with your child!

“Come and sit with me a minute. Let’s find out what God says about wisely facing and feeling hard things.”

EARLY CHILDHOOD (2-6 years old)

Help your child make a simple paper heart with a sad face on it. Write Psalm 6:2 on the back: “Have compassion on me, LORD, for I am weak.”

Everyone has sad days. When we are sad, we don’t have to pretend to be happy. **It is good to say our feelings out loud. It is really good to tell Jesus and ask him to have compassion (a tender heart) toward us.** Let’s sit here quietly and think about Jesus hugging us when we are sad. Let’s thank him for his tender heart.

Where shall we put this heart to remind us that Jesus understands us when we are sad inside?

ELEMENTARY AGE (5-10 years old)

The Bible has a special word for times when you face something hard and it makes you feel deeply sad. “Lament” means to feel deep grief, sorrow or regret.

What might make you feel lament? Let’s both draw a picture of a hard, sad day, a day of lament. Then we will tell each other the story about the picture.

First, let’s ask God to give us understanding about this. After hearing the stories, let’s look carefully and find where God was in the pictures. **Were there little reminders of his presence? Or was there a big rescue? Did he cause the sun to shine? Were there blooming flowers? Or a kind person?**

Read Psalm 86:1-3. Slowly write it around the edge of the picture like a frame. “Bend down, O LORD, and hear my prayer; answer me, for I need your help. Protect me, for I am devoted to you. Save me, for I serve you and trust you. You are my God. Be merciful to me, O LORD, for I am calling on you constantly.”

PRETEEN/EARLY ADOLESCENT (10-14 years old)

Slowly read Psalm 86:1-7 and then read the lyrics of the hymn “I Must Tell Jesus.” Talk about how these songs are alike. Talk about how they are different. Then rewrite the psalm in your own words or rewrite the song.

“I must tell Jesus all of my trials; I cannot bear these burdens alone. In my distress He kindly will help me. He ever loves and cares for His own. I must tell Jesus, I must tell Jesus. I cannot bear my burdens alone. I must tell Jesus, I must tell Jesus. Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.”

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

“*Grieving with God*,” an International Network of Children’s Ministry’s “Wisdom for Leadership” interview with **Gordon D. West**, KidZ at Heart’s President and CEO, by **Michayla White**, INCM’s Executive Director:

www.facebook.com/INCM1/videos/746026619269899

Emotions Chart, by Carson Dellosa Education:

www.carsondellosa.com