

How to Talk to Kids about “The Problem of Pain”  
... and Why You Should Do it Sooner Than You Think  
By Amanda Kelsch

My first discussion with my daughter about theodicy started on the bathroom floor.

As my queasy seven-year-old sat poised at the foot of the toilet, I stroked her hair and prayed that her stomach bug would pass quickly and God would comfort her. Then she began to pray. She cried out her laments to the heavens like the prophet Jeremiah: “WHY, GOD, WHY? When you created the world, why did you make throwing up part of it? With all your infinite wisdom and power, why can’t you just take it away?” (Okay, she may not have used the phrase “infinite wisdom,” but the sentiment was there.)

This went on for quite awhile. What she needed in that moment was for me to agree that it stinks to be sick and tell her it would all be okay. It was not the time for theological discussions about the problem of pain, but it was an indication that the questions were surfacing.

For all of us living right now in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, it is an unsettling time. Schools are closed. Families are isolated. Life as our children knew it has been turned upside down. Though the comments we hear may be centered around boredom and a desire to see friends, many of our kids are surely wondering, “Why is this all happening?” More specifically, “Why is God allowing this all to happen?”

Theodicy is a defense of God's goodness and justice in the face of the existence of evil. It is the resolution (or at least a possible answer) to the question of why an all-knowing, loving, holy and good God allows evil and suffering on this earth.

Obviously none of us have the ultimate answers. The book of Job contains the clearest dialogue on the subject as God is being accused of wrongly inflicting suffering on Job, but no clear, concise answer is given by God, only more questions. Biblical scholars and philosophers have

spent lifetimes pondering this and still fall short of an impenetrable explanation. But our children are looking for more than a promise that it will all be okay or an admonition to just dismiss these nagging questions and trust God. We need to carve out time to have these conversations and offer them tools for making sense of this dilemma.

Let's be proactive. At some point in your child's life, he or she will wrestle with this issue. Isn't it better to prepare them now with an arsenal of theological wisdom when suffering is largely theoretical than later in life when it is painfully personal? One day instead of asking, "Why does God allow bad things to happen to people," it will be, "Why did God allow this terrible thing to happen to ME?" Today we can use a minor hardship, unanswered prayer, perplexing Bible story or practically any news headline as a springboard to a philosophical discussion.

Down the road a devastating tragedy may bring up the same questions but make the conversation too real for our kids to handle. Just as I was not about to engage in a philosophical discussion on the bathroom floor in the middle of the night with my daughter, it is never wise to address theodicy in the midst of suffering. The best thing Job's friends did was to sit silently for three days. Their debates proceeding from this would have been far more beneficial in a different setting.

So here are 10 practical tips for starting these discussions now:

1.) Ask lots and lots of questions.

Jesus taught through questions. God answered Job with questions. The more our kids talk, the more we understand their current perspective on the topic. It is tempting to want to offer a quick answer and move on, rather than posing even more questions back at our kids and prolonging the talks. Let's start with asking *ourselves*: Why don't we ask more questions?

- Maybe we are afraid of what their answers will be. When they observe that God did not take away their cold when they prayed for him to, we can ask: How do you feel about that? (But not: "Does that make you feel like God doesn't care?" No need to create

an issue where there isn't one.) Or: Why do you think he allows us to not feel well sometimes?

There's a possibility your child's answer will be, "Because he doesn't care/wasn't listening/is mad at me" or some other false notion. Well, at least you know what's on their hearts! Now you can try to talk them into believing true statements about God, or you can (you guessed it)... ask more questions! I would rather take that time to draw out their heart and plan a quiet time or family devotional for a later time that corrects their perspective.

- Maybe we don't want to take the time when it's inconvenient. For many kids, these troubling questions surface in the quiet moments of solitude at night. A wise Instagram mom once noted, "At bedtime all my children turn into dehydrated philosophers who need a hug." Perhaps stall tactics are involved, but we should note also that our kids are quite capable of contemplating the deeper questions of life. Sometimes my kids might get to sleep a little later than planned, but the conversations we have had about their deepest fears, concerns, and regrets are invaluable.
- Maybe we are afraid the conversation will lead to a point where we run out of answers. Which leads to our second tip...

2.) Don't attempt to have all the answers.

God never asks us to have his wisdom, only to imitate his love (Ephesians 5:1-2). We can do this through our tone of gentleness and patience. We must get comfortable with the questions and the wrestling. I often find myself asking, "What do *you* think?" and prefacing many of my responses with "I can't say for sure, but maybe..."

Encourage them to also recognize their limited wisdom and perspective. Use younger siblings as an example: "You're only five years older than your brother and you can understand why I can't give them everything they ask for. I'm thirty years older than you and my experience helps me understand many things better. God is infinitely older than both of us. There are some things we just aren't capable of understanding." Or:

“Remember when you wanted ice powers like Elsa? Why do you think God didn’t give that to you?”

3.) Make a habit of addressing theodicy within Bible stories.

Lots of “why” questions come up as we read through the Old Testament. We try to keep things age-appropriate but even the most basic gist of some of the stories can be troubling: Why did God have to flood the whole earth? Why did he ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Did Pharaoh really kill all the baby boys? Why didn’t God stop him? Why did David have to kill Goliath and not just scare him away? Why did Jesus have to die? Allow time for these conversations. Look at the tough questions as opportunities. Your kids are listening and pondering deep things in their hearts and it’s good! It is also easier to explain God’s justification for suffering in situations that occurred thousands of years ago with the benefit of hindsight than to propose possible reasons for current situations.

4.) Focus on good that comes from pain.

There cannot be good without evil. How would we ever be able to help someone else if no one needed help? What do we admire about Jesus? His compassion, sacrifice, forgiveness, gentleness, courage. None of these characteristics are necessary if everyone is living in perfect bliss already. We can appreciate how suffering teaches us how to love others and become stronger and more Christ-like.

5.) Talk about free will.

Discuss what the world would be like if God had not created humans with free will. Put this in terms of the relationships they know:

- Would you rather have parents who take care of you when you are hurt because God has programmed Mom and Dad like robots, or because they love you as their child?
- Do you want us to be required to buy you a certain number of gifts at Christmas, or do you want us to be excited to buy you things because we love to see your joy?

Along with the ability to freely love unfortunately comes the ability to hate and hurt. Giving us the choice to obey also opens up the possibility of disobedience, which has led to much of the pain we see around us.

God has mercifully introduced pain as a warning in the form of his discipline and natural consequences. I explained to my six-year-old one day why pain can be good. For instance, it hurts to touch fire because it teaches us to pull our hand away and not get seriously burnt. The next day his friend came over for a play date and hurt himself. My son informed him it was good to feel the pain because it taught him not to keep bumping his head. I don't think his friend appreciated this perspective but I was encouraged to see the philosophy applied to real life!

6.) Have an eternal perspective.

The book of Job is believed to be the first written portion of the Bible. Questions raised in that book echo throughout the rest of the scriptures and a promise of freedom from suffering is never given until the end of Revelation: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (21:4).

If we have difficulty viewing the problem of pain on earth in light of eternity, how much more must our short-sighted, impatient offspring who can barely make it to the end of a long car trip?

You can ask things like, "Do you remember last year when you had a cold for a couple days? Did that ruin your whole year? Why not? Because two days out of 365 seems very short. Plus, after feeling badly you probably appreciated feeling well for the other days. How is that like trials on earth versus an eternity in Heaven?"

7.) Focus on the cross.

While it may be difficult to understand the necessity of suffering at times, it can be a consolation to know that whatever this life throws at us, Jesus has probably experienced worse. Long, long ago, God and Jesus

sat in Heaven and planned out the life Jesus would live on earth and chose to include every type of pain known to humanity: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual. They chose Jesus to die at the point in history when execution was at the peak of torture. God does not allow us to suffer while staying exempt, and he sent Jesus to live and die on earth so he could not only save us but also empathize with us (Hebrews 4:15).

8.) Encourage prayer.

When tough questions arise, pray together about them. Encourage kids to be open and real with God about their emotions and doubts. The difference between Job and his friends is that the friends spent much time talking *about* God but Job talked directly *to* God. And look at who God answered.

9.) Help them appreciate the beauty of this uncertain, dangerous life.

We live in a fallen world. Romans 8:22 says the whole earth is groaning, waiting for the return of Jesus, like a woman in labor anticipating her child. Many children ask why God even created this world if Heaven is so much better. Couldn't we just skip this difficult part and get right to the best part?

I would turn the question back to your children and ask, do you want to go straight to Heaven? What are the gifts of earth you want to experience? God put such care into the amazing details of this world, it seems he wants us to appreciate it while we are here, even if we are simultaneously looking forward to eternity with him.

Plan a fun obstacle course or scavenger hunt that leads to a big prize. Afterwards ask them, did you enjoy the process/journey or would you rather I just handed you the prize?

10.) Above all else, we must teach our children to trust in the three core tenets of God's character: his perfect power, love and wisdom.

The first two and a half chapters of Lamentations are brutal. Jeremiah's gut-level honesty in his complaints to God rival Job's. He is upset not only about his own affliction but also about those around him. But then his mood shifts. He writes, "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed" (3:21). He continues with reminders to himself (and us) about God's goodness and sovereignty.

Children easily accept these truths at a young age, but those convictions will be tested. As we teach our children, it can be easy to focus on teaching them to obey and character development. Let's not forget to consistently come back to these aspects of God we want to be instilling in our children that will serve as their foundation.

- Help your children understand his strength and might and majesty. Consider what wows your kids and put God in that context: he is better than all superheroes, the creator of nature, space, and animals, the healer of all ailments.
- Help your kids trust in their Heavenly Father as their ultimate source of emotional security, the epitome of love. Our tangible love to them will help them grasp God's intangible comfort and stories of how Jesus demonstrated his love to others offer another physical example.
- Help your kids see God's wisdom. As we educate our children in any subject, we can remind them of the source of all knowledge. Just this morning as my preschooler was learning about trees, we discussed God's brilliance in making humans exhale carbon dioxide which trees need to survive and trees give off oxygen which we need to breathe in. My math-obsessed kindergartener respects the fact that we may not know the biggest number possible, but God does!

I will continue to reassure my kids through this uncertain time that everything will be okay. I will also take this opportunity to teach them *why* I have this confidence: because of my faith in these truths about God.

If our kids are wrestling with “the problem of pain,” it means two things: they believe God is omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient and they are troubled by the idea of people suffering. I *want* my children to have such compassionate hearts that their hearts are grieved. I also want them to have such deep faith in God’s sovereignty and goodness that their hearts are healed.

Let’s not shy away from these tough talks; let’s embrace them. Let’s give our children tools to guide them on this journey, not clichés that will fall short in combating true devastation. Let’s teach our children to wrestle with God and come out the other side with a trust in God’s goodness that will last.