

# Introduction



The fall of man altered every atom of creation. From manhood to motherhood to matrimony, nothing is as it should be. Some after-effects of the fall are mere annoyances, like the fear of spiders, or indigestion, or having to wear uncomfortable clothing. But most by-products of the fall take the breath from your lungs, wrench your heart from your chest, and are counted in tears. Childhood mental illness is one of those by-products.

According to the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), one in six American children between the ages of six and seventeen have a diagnosed mental health disorder, the most prevalent of which include anxiety, depression, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).<sup>1</sup> The CDC reports that suicide is the second leading cause of death among American children aged ten to fourteen.<sup>2</sup> Mental Health America reports that between 2020 and 2021, there was a 13 percent increase in cases of children experiencing major depressive episodes.<sup>3</sup> That is 206,000 children in the United States alone. Whether these increases are due to broader

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1. Michael Devitt, 'Study: One in Six U.S. Children Has a Mental Illness' (American Academy of Family Physicians: March 18, 2019), [aafp.org/news/health-of-the-public/20190318childmentalillness](https://aafp.org/news/health-of-the-public/20190318childmentalillness)

2. 'Suicide' (National Institute of Mental Health. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Accessed August 1, 2022. [nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide](https://nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide)

3. '2020 Mental Health in America – Youth Data' (Mental Health America, Inc., 2022). [mhanational.org/issues/2020/mental-health-america-youth-data](https://mhanational.org/issues/2020/mental-health-america-youth-data)

screening methods or an actual rise in cases, it remains that a significant number of American households are affected by varying degrees of childhood mental illness.

The World Health Organization reports similar statistics globally, claiming that ‘mental health conditions account for 16 percent of the global burden of disease and injury in people aged ten to nineteen years.’<sup>4</sup> It reports that up to 20 percent of children worldwide are diagnosed with a mental health disorder, with half of those disorders manifesting by age fourteen. Globally, suicide is the third leading cause of death in children aged fifteen to nineteen years. More than half of these children do not receive treatment for their disorders.

These alarming statistics play out in the small Christian school where I teach, as well as in schools across the nation. In the last few years alone, my school has seen an alarming rise in self-harm, psychiatric hospitalizations, suicidal thoughts, and students who are unable to leave their home to come to school because of varying degrees of anxiety. I have sat next to a student who was retching in a trash can because of a debilitating panic attack. I have met students at their parents’ car to talk them through simply coming into the building. Our school has come alongside parents in helping to unlock the mystery of intense irrational fear or profound and stifling sadness. Christian families are not immune from the scourge of childhood mental illness.

There are myriad reasons for the uptick in mental health challenges among our children. We can point to social media, Covid, a removal of prayer and Bible reading from the schools, fatherlessness, or disastrous government policies. But no matter the cause, the fallout has left thousands of families in despair, confusion, and impotent desperation.

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4. ‘Adolescent and Young Adult Health’ (World Health Organization, January 18, 2021). [who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescents-health-risks-and-solutions](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescents-health-risks-and-solutions)

If you are raising a child who is stricken with mental illness, whether your child is adopted or biological, you may know the heartache, intensity, and uncertainty of the day to day, and the helplessness and frustration of navigating a life full of disconnects in logic, embarrassing behavior, and fear for the future. God sees you, He knows you and your child, and He shares your pain. He is sovereign, He is good, and He has not left us alone in our affliction.

## **My Story**

In the world of public special education, childhood mental illness is termed Emotional Disturbance, and classrooms designed to teach children with mental illness are termed Emotional Support. I taught in such classrooms for the first fourteen years of my career, which to date spans almost four decades. I love how God works, even though often you can't see it until you have the gift of hindsight. I never expected to teach children with mental illness. What began as a foot in the door to teaching ended up becoming a passion and love for children who are seen as bizarre, are often violent, perennially anxious, rarely trusting, and perpetually marginalized. If 'the Lord is near to the broken hearted' (Ps. 34:18), He was certainly working in my classroom.

Over those fourteen years in emotional support classrooms, I worked with a motley myriad of students. I witnessed the heartache of abuse, abandonment, and generational recurrences of madness. Many of my classrooms were permeated with violence, physical restraints, and regular disruption. Early in my career, classrooms for emotionally disturbed children did not make the distinction between diagnoses, severity of disorders, or even ages of the students. One of my first classrooms was comprised of twelve boys, ranging in age from six through twelve, with diagnoses that ranged from autism to oppositional defiant disorder to psychosis. Included on the

class list were a towering and violent sixth grader who was two inches taller than I was, a twelve-year-old rapist, an eight-year-old lanky and aggressive boy with an intellectual disability and a very foul mouth, and a tiny meek and withdrawn first grader with autism. I had one diminutive assistant, who was easily forty years my senior, and a head full of book learning. And though at the time of my first classroom I didn't know Him yet, I had a God who was working mightily on my behalf.

## Our Story

For the first twelve years of my career, I was a churchgoer, but not a believer. In midsummer of 1997, a woman introduced Henry Blackaby's Bible study, *Experiencing God*, to our church.<sup>5</sup> My husband, Steve, and I both participated, and what we learned placed our wandering feet squarely on the path to Christ. In the pages of Blackaby's study, I read a truth so profound that I lingered on the words, returning to them again and again: 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him' (John 6:44). As we learned more about God, the work of Christ on the cross, and hungered more and more for His Word, I suddenly understood that we were being drawn in by God Himself! The first scripture we memorized for the study was John 15:5, 'I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.' The relief that resulted from the truth of that verse grabbed hold of me in an ineffable grip of love and comfort. Keith Getty's preeminent and illustrious modern hymn *In Christ Alone* captures what was happening in my heart as I read those refreshing truths: 'What heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are stilled, when strivings cease, my Comforter, my All in All, here in the love of Christ I stand.'<sup>6</sup>

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5. Claude V. King and Henry T. Blackaby, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God; Leader's Guide* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 1999).

6. Keith and Kristyn Getty, *In Christ Alone* (MP3. Getty Music, n.d.).

## **Finding God's Sovereignty in the Midst of Childhood Mental Illness**

On a chilly April Tuesday morning, twenty-two years after my first encounter with childhood mental illness, and ten years after Jesus Christ took hold of my husband and me, I got on my knees and confessed to God that my walk with Him was too comfortable. I asked Him to show me a way my husband and I might stretch the limits of our comfort zone, to be better contributors to His kingdom. My husband is fond of saying, 'Be careful what you pray for,' because the outcome of that prayer eventually propelled us down a road we never imagined we'd be traveling. At first, the entrance to the road seemed miraculously paved, clearly marked, wide, and exciting. However, the speed bumps, yield signs, potholes, construction zones, speed traps, shoulderless cliffsides, and tortuous curves we eventually encountered left us weary, haggard, and often looking for the nearest exit ramp. Much of our journey was spent white-knuckled and clinging in fear and desperation to our Father and Guide.

When God placed me in that first classroom for emotionally disturbed children, I had no idea He was preparing my family and me for the adoption of our daughter Jackie. I couldn't have known that the violence and mayhem, joys and victories in my classrooms were all boot camp for bringing mental illness into our home.

When we were raising our daughter, the intensity of feelings that ran rampant and overtook our lives ranged from joy, to hope, to intense isolation, to shame, to confusion, and even to feelings of outright insanity. Trying to navigate a broken system, being accused (more than once) of child abuse, receiving regular phone calls and emails from school, endless counseling sessions, trying (and failing) to find the one right intervention that would finally cure our daughter, and living in a house where chaos and hostility prevailed, all took their toll.

But, through it all, we found comfort from a steady, present, loving God who could relate to the trials we were experiencing. And so we clung to Him with all we had, because He was all we had. And He didn't disappoint. His love has never failed, and His sovereignty and goodness are as sure as the change of seasons.

This book is my effort to showcase a good God in a broken world, even a world that crushes the lives of little kids, and leaves parents heartbroken and wanting. Or to put it another way, I desire to exalt God in the lowest points in our lives, to testify to His sufficiency and goodness, and to show that our good and noble desires in what He calls us to are penultimate to what must be our highest and primary desire: God Himself.

# Loneliness and Isolation



I stood in the candy aisle a few days before Easter, trying desperately to focus. I knew what each of my children liked in their baskets. Peanut butter cups for Claire. Snickers for Michael. Skittles for Matt, Claire's husband, and salted caramel for Alison, Michael's wife. Jackie liked Sour Patch Kids. This annual errand usually elicited great joy and anticipation, but this year was different. There seemed to be too many choices, the lights above me were too bright, the people around me too distant. I felt somehow detached from my experience. The labels on the candy bars shimmied and danced through my tears, my mind so locked up it wouldn't let me distinguish one brand from the next. Never before, or since, have I ever been so utterly trapped in such a fog of loneliness and isolation. I stood frozen to the spot, disconnected from everything around me, hugging my arms in a vice grip, gently rocking back and forth. 'Help me, Lord,' I whispered.

## **The Savior Who Knows**

If you are raising a child who is mentally ill, you may feel lonely, even in a crowd of other parents, even, and sometimes especially, in your church. There is no frame of reference for raising a child who is afflicted, no parenting manual, no tidy method or intervention. Even parents of so-called 'strong willed' children cannot begin to imagine the stress and chaos of the day to day. I have heard multiple stories of parents who were left alone by friends, family, and their church because no

one knew what to do with or for them. Loneliness and isolation can become the norm. Praise God we have a Savior who knows what it is like to be alone.

Walmart at Easter is no Gethsemane,<sup>1</sup> but I knew that crying out to Christ in the midst of my desolation in that store would not fall on deaf ears because of His own few days before Easter. No, I was not going to bear the weight of all humanity, but I was living in a torrent of chaos and violence, police visits and counseling sessions, stealing and cutting, and marriage-crushing stress that often left me withered with despair and hopelessness. I knew Jesus could relate.

Picture Him in the garden. He has just completed His earthly ministry, teaching and preaching to His lost sheep, and preparing His little band of men, those thick fellows who were often slow on the uptake and had no clue why they were following Him. He must have been exhausted. His ministry was urgent and all-consuming, and not always fruitful. And He knew how it would end. Even though He understood what lay beyond that first Good Friday, that promised 'joy set before him' (Heb. 12:2),<sup>2</sup> His humanness led Him to fear the physical pain and utter desolation He was about to face. He was surrounded by people, yet isolated and friendless. He did not 'entrust himself to them ... for he himself knew what was in man' (John 2:24-25). And there in the garden, when He needed His disciples the most, He found them sleeping.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps you can relate. Your child is not like other children. Your parenting does not and cannot remotely resemble that of your friends with typical children, so they cannot identify

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1. Matthew 26:36: 'Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray."'

2. '[L]ooking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.'

3. Matthew 26:40 'And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour?"'



with you and you can't explain it to them. Every outing, every family visit, every day is a calculated, mapped out plan for getting through without mayhem or embarrassment. Even if you have a wonderful system of support, you still are alone in your experience.

Jesus was profoundly alone in His experience too. He had no confidant. No counselor, no close friend to call in the middle of the night to share in what He was feeling. He had no one to relate to, and no one could relate to Him. Standing accused before the Sanhedrin, facing an incredulous assessment by Pontius Pilate, enduring the scoffing curiosity of Herod, listening to the mocking of the Roman guards, feeling their spit on His face, stumbling along the Via Dolorosa beneath the heavy crossbeam and the crowd's staring eyes, ascending Calvary, and submitting to being nailed hand and foot to a tree, He was alone. For the first and only time in eternity, Christ was forsaken, isolated, and without help. He cried out, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46).

For all He endured, and in His most lonesome moments, Jesus never stopped crying out to His Father. And His pleas were no eloquent, censored prayers. They were raw, pleading, and audacious laments for help and relief. Face to the ground, He pleaded, 'Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass' (Matt. 26:39). Writhing in agony on the cross, He searched in prayer for His Father, wondering, 'Why?' I don't know how long Jesus felt forsaken by God, but even the shortest possible increment of time would have been too long. Yet He never stopped praying. He never stopped reaching out for help from God. And knowing He could have at any time called down an army of angels to relieve Him from the ordeal, instead, fueled by great love and unfathomable grace, He prayed for forgiveness for the ignorant creatures for whom He was bearing this agony. 'Forgive them,' He pleaded. 'They know not what they do' (Luke 23:34).

Then it was finished. And in the finishing came our rescue, and our permission to cry to Him with our own raw and audacious lament.

### **The Word Used the Word**

Despite my faith in Him, I sometimes struggle with the invisibility of God. When I pray, I can tend to feel alone, and doubt that He is listening, because I can see nothing tangible to affirm His presence. After a loud and angry evening with our daughter, or yet another phone call from the school, or after finding the umpteenth stolen electronic device in her room, or another parent has called complaining about our daughter's harassment of their child, the loneliness and isolation would set in, and I'd go inward. Praying seemed elusive at times, because the cacophony of our lives drowned out the still, small voice of my Savior.

Maybe you have felt the same. You pray. You plead and ask for relief. But there is silence on the other end. You become tempted to believe that God isn't really there. The loneliness is compounded.

When Satan tried to convince Jesus to forget His Father in the wilderness, Christ was alone, hungry, and sleep-deprived.<sup>4</sup> Being fully human, I'm sure He was vulnerable to the attack. Yet He counterattacked with, ironically enough, His own words. Satan knew how to land a strategically placed scripture, but he was dealing with the Word Himself! So, if the author of salvation, the very Word of God used this tactic, so should we.

When you are tempted to forget the omnipresence and benevolence of God because your life is louder than His voice, use the megaphone of Scripture to drown out the clamor of the trial.

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4. Matthew 4:1-2: 'Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.'

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:20)

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. (1 John 5:14)

If anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. (John 9:31)

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. (1 Pet. 3:12)

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:16)

I have learned to meditate on His Word when I am feeling alone. Jesus Christ has left us little room to doubt His existence and His care for us. Because of Christ's finished work on the cross we can, indeed, 'draw near to his throne of grace' with confidence and boldness. Like the angels, who have full access to the throne room, we too can walk, with humility and reverence, into the presence of God.<sup>5</sup> We are told to draw near to him. And what is the outcome of our drawing near? Incredibly, He draws near to us (Jas. 4:8)!<sup>6</sup> The King of the universe draws near to me in my loneliness to show His abounding love for me. Though my situation doesn't change, my countenance does, and I am helped.

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5. Job 1:6: 'Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.'

6. 'Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.'

I included Romans 1:20 in this list, because I have also found that meditating on the magnificence of nature helps me ground myself in the reality of God's existence, and I feel His presence even more sharply. When I doubt, I consider, for example, the enormous pine tree in my backyard. It is old and massive, yet somehow it takes water from the ground, and in a great gravity-defying feat, brings it all the way to the highest most branches without pump or vacuum. Incredible. Yesterday, I stopped to watch hundreds of honey bees busily gathering nectar from the lovely little white flowers that have bloomed all across the vine on our fence. I pondered how those bees were designed for the very purpose of pollinating those flowers so they could be enjoyed year after year. Or, how about the fact that I have grown human beings *inside my body*? When I consider the wonder, majesty, grandeur, minutiae, vastness, intricacy, opulence, and sublimity of creation, I see the genius of the Creator, and I am convinced once more that He exists, which comforts me in my loneliness.

### **His Rod and His Staff Will Comfort**

Perhaps one of the most illustrative examples of Christ's care and constant nearness in our lives is the depiction of Him as a shepherd. Shepherds are utterly dedicated to their flock in a way that is all-consuming in their lives. Consider all the times God refers to Christ as our shepherd and to us as His sheep:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. (Ps. 23:1-4)

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. (John 10:14)

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matt. 9:36)

He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. (Isa. 40:11)

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. (Luke 15:3-5)

In Bible times, shepherding was a 24/7 affair. If you were a shepherd, that's all you were. You did more than feed and water your sheep. You cared for their health and protected them from parasites and predators. You slept with them in the field at night, keeping a wary eye out for wild beasts. Making them lie down meant you were seeing to it that your sheep were relaxed. Stressed sheep tend to wander, and they don't want to eat. Or, if they are hungry, they will roam and roam in search of food. A good shepherd will make his sheep lie still so they can rest and receive nourishment. Moving water will stop a sheep in its tracks, so shepherds need to lead them to still water in order for them to ford a stream or drink from it. The oil spoken of in Psalm 23:5 was more than symbolic.<sup>7</sup> Shepherds would routinely rub oil on their sheep's heads to protect them from insects. Parasites could be extremely uncomfortable or even

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7. 'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.'

deadly for sheep. The rod and staff were used as guides, but also as prods. Both uses gave comfort, even if they sometimes were uncomfortable, because they kept the sheep together. Sheep don't survive well on their own.

The Bible uses this beautiful imagery to remind us that God is always with us, even in our loneliest moments. We are His sheep, and He cares about every detail of our life.

In my church growing up, the front of the sanctuary was dominated by an enormous stained glass window depicting a larger than life Christ, tenderly hefting a sweet lamb across His shoulders. I loved that window, and still think of that image today. I like to imagine I am that lamb. What great comfort to know that Jesus is a 24/7 shepherd who looks on me with compassion, knows me, will find me when I'm lost, and, when I'm lonely, gently lead me back to His bosom where I'll find comfort and rest.

### **The Bosom of the Savior**

My heart aches when I think about Jesus in the garden – because He endured so much for me – and for you. Nothing we experience in life, not even the extreme level of loneliness that living with a child with mental illness brings, can come close to the loneliness Jesus suffered for you and for me on that first Easter. There are promises in the Bible we can stand on, boldly and with solid assurance because we have a Savior who can empathize with us. We are never alone.

I went home from Walmart that day with a few bags of candy and a settled peace. I knew I was going home to the tumult, but I was going in the bosom of my Savior, armed with His promises to draw near to me in my loneliness. It was a good Easter.