



# *grace for the children*

FINDING HOPE IN THE MIDST OF CHILD  
AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL ILLNESS

Matthew S. Stanford



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1

# *A Gift and a Reward*

*Behold, children are a gift of the LORD,  
the fruit of the womb is a reward.*

**PSALM 127:3**

**O**NE OF MY PASSIONS is training pastors and ministry staff to recognize and respond to the mental-health problems of those they are serving. At the end of my workshops, we always have a question and answer time, and during one of these sessions a young pastor raised her hand. She wanted to know the best way to minister to a new family that had recently started attending her church.

Ross, Ellen, and their two children, Ashley and Charlie, moved to the area three years ago. At that time Charlie had just turned five and was beginning kindergarten while Ashley was going into the second grade. The family was interested in attending a small Bible church near their home, so Ellen made an appointment with the children's minister to discuss

## *Grace for the Children*

Charlie. In the year prior to their move Charlie had been diagnosed with mild autism, and while he was a happy, carefree little boy he did have trouble sitting still and tended to wander. The children's minister assured Ellen that the Sunday school staff could accommodate Charlie, and he was welcomed with open arms.

Most Sunday mornings that first year Charlie did fine, but at least once a month one of his parents had to be called out of the service to get him. At school the academic and behavioral demands of kindergarten were simply too much for Charlie, and he quickly fell behind. Frustrated, he began acting out. By the middle of the year he had been moved to a special education class. Over the next two years Charlie's behavior on Sunday mornings deteriorated. He would pace around the class and refuse to sit down. When frustrated he would yell and disrupt the class. His yelling was often so loud that he could be heard in the service. In first grade Charlie was given an additional diagnosis of Attentional Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

Many Sundays either Ellen or Ross would stay home with Charlie so the other parent could attend church with Ashley. Charlie's behavioral problems were taking a toll on the family. They felt isolated and alone. One Sunday morning Charlie bit his Sunday school teacher when she was trying to restrain him. Charlie was prescribed medication by a child psychiatrist to help control his impulsive behavior. On several occasions the children's minister met with Ellen and Ross, but it was

## *A Gift and a Reward*

clear that she considered Charlie the “bad kid” and saw his behavior the result of willful disobedience rather than a neurodevelopmental disorder. The church’s response to Charlie was more disciplinary than accommodating.

Things reached a head one Sunday morning when Charlie, now seven, threw a toy at another child, causing a large laceration on the girl’s forehead. To remedy the problem, the church’s leadership sought a restraining order against Charlie so that he could not attend. This was done without consulting Ellen and Ross, who found out about the restraining order when a constable delivered court documents to their home one afternoon. Now seriously wounded by the body of Christ, this broken family was seeking refuge at a new church. The twenty or so pastors in the room at my workshop were speechless.

How could anyone imagine that a restraining order against a suffering child and struggling family expresses the unconditional love and limitless grace of Christ? But this type of harmful response to mental illness is not uncommon in the church. My own research on Christians with mental illness demonstrates that 30-40 percent of them have had a negative interaction (such as having a pastor tell them there is no such thing as mental illness) when they seek counseling or assistance from their church in relation to their disorder.<sup>1</sup>

Mental illness is a terrifying experience, especially when a father and mother have to watch their child suffer from destructive, uncontrollable thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Given Jesus’ heart for children (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark

10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17), the church should be a place of grace and unconditional love for families struggling to care for a child with mental illness. Unfortunately, due to fear and spiritual ignorance, the church has struggled in ministering to these families. It is my hope that the information presented in this book will provide a better understanding of mental illness, both from a scientific perspective and through the eyes of faith. To truly minister to suffering children and their families the way that Christ would, we must see them with his eyes. So let's start by understanding God's creative role in the birth of all children.

### **THE HANDS OF THE MAKER**

All children are "fearfully and wonderfully made" in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). A creative act similar to the creation of Adam is repeated at the origin of each person. God wills that each individual life comes into existence and actively sustains them moment by moment (Colossians 1:16-17). God knits all children together in their mothers' wombs (Psalm 139:13-16), and they are all—even those with developmental and psychological disorders—conceived for the purpose of displaying his glory (Isaiah 43:7). God is intentional in the creation of his children (Psalm 119:73), endowing each with a divine purpose and plan (Jeremiah 29:11) and bestowing them as a gift and reward upon their earthly parents (Psalm 127:3). Even before a child is conceived, God knows everything about them and longs for an

## *A Gift and a Reward*

intimate relationship with them (Psalm 139:16; Jeremiah 1:5; Ephesians 1:4-5). The Scriptures tell us that it is beyond our finite minds to fully grasp this divine process (Ecclesiastes 11:5), but we should rest in the fact that God is intentional and intimately involved in the creation of every new life.

Every newborn child is a highly complex being, unlike any other living creature God has made. The Scriptures tell us that we are an embodied spirit, having both physical (material) and nonphysical (immaterial) aspects to our being (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Describing the developing Christ child, Luke outlines four aspects to our being (Luke 2:52). He writes, "Jesus kept increasing in wisdom [mental] and stature [physical], and in favor with God [spiritual] and men [relational]." So a child, like the young incarnate Christ, is a unity of physical, mental, spiritual, and relational facets, with each aspect affecting and being affected by all the others.

**Physical.** All children are born into a physical world, and to interact with it, an aspect of their being must be physical. God has given them a complex set of sensory systems that allows them to take in stimulation from the environment and relay it to the brain. They can touch, taste, see, smell, and hear the world around them. At birth, however, a child's brain is not fully developed. A combination of inborn genetic information and experience shapes how their brain cells will develop and connect. These new connections form specialized systems that give rise to their thoughts, feelings,

and emotions. This process of brain maturation is ongoing throughout childhood and adolescence, with the development of some neural systems not being fully complete until early adulthood.<sup>2</sup>

Our bodies are the aspect of our being that we are most aware of on a daily basis. Believers and nonbelievers alike, scientists, philosophers, and theologians all agree that we have a physical body. However, the Scriptures are clear: we are more than simply a physical body (2 Corinthians 5:8). There is an immaterial, nonphysical aspect to our being—what some would call our soul or mind.

**Mental.** Children's thoughts, feelings, and emotions are more than simply the product of neurochemical changes and electrical discharges in the brain. While the functioning of the brain is integral to the existence of the mind, that alone is not sufficient to explain it. Similarly, to imagine the mind as completely separate and unrelated to the physical doesn't seem correct either. The mind, what some might call consciousness or soul, is a bridge between the material and the immaterial. As an extension of the physical (brain) world, it allows a child to interact with the nonphysical (spirit). In the mind they plan actions (Proverbs 16:9), choose to sin or not to sin (Romans 8:6-7; 2 Corinthians 10:5), connect with God through prayer (1 Corinthians 14:15), receive divine revelation and understanding (Luke 24:45), meditate on the truths of God (Colossians 3:2), and are transformed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:2).



## *A Gift and a Reward*

The mind of a child, while endowed with godly attributes (Matthew 18:2-4) at birth, is not fully developed, and much like the brain is shaped by a combination of genetics and experience as we grow (Proverbs 22:6,15; Luke 2:52; Colossians 3:21). The Scriptures teach us that we also have a third and even more amazing level of being, a spirit.

***Spiritual.*** Like God himself, our children are spiritual beings: God has breathed his very breath into them (Genesis 2:7). That's how we differ from the animals: like the animals, we were created from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:19), but only humans bear the breath of God: his very image. As spiritual beings, then, our children have the potential for an intimate spiritual union with God. No other living creature, not even the angels, is given such an opportunity.

***Relational.*** Our children were also created to be in relationship. God himself said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). While our first and greatest relational need is to know God, we should never underestimate the importance of being in fellowship with other believers. The topic of relationship is common throughout the Scriptures. The Bible offers us guidance on a variety of relationships, including marriage (Ephesians 5:22-33), parenting (Psalm 127:3-5), siblings (Proverbs 17:17), friendships (Proverbs 27:9), and with those who are not so friendly (Matthew 5:25). Relationship is one of the reasons why Jesus gave us the church: so we might be together and never be alone (Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:7).

## THE HOLISTIC SELF

So how does all this—physical, mental, spiritual, and relational—work together? Let’s look at a simple visual representation I use with clients to help them understand how mental illness affects our whole being. Figure 1.1 shows the spiritual, mental, physical, and relational facets of our being, each separate but interacting with the others. Our physical body interacts with stimuli and individuals (relationships) in the environment outside and the mind within. The mind, connected to the body through the functions of the brain and nervous system, is also in contact with our immaterial spirit.



**Figure 1.1.** The holistic self

Our body senses and reacts to the external environment, and our mind uses that information to perceive, understand, and interpret our surroundings. The mind forms our thoughts and plans our actions. Our spirit, when connected to God, works to transform the mind into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). This interaction within our being allows us to be involved in healthy, meaningful relationships with others.

Since we were created as a unity, dysfunction or disorder in one aspect of the self negatively affects all levels of our being. For example, in a child diagnosed with a mental illness, a neurochemical dysfunction in the brain (physical) results in abnormal thoughts and feelings (mental) leading to broken relationships (relational) and difficulty connecting with God and other believers (spiritual).

### **EFFECTS OF SIN ON THE PHYSICAL CREATION**

If God is intimately involved in the creation of every new life, why are so many children born with developmental and psychological disorders? To answer this question, we have to go back to the parents of all humans, Adam and Eve. Created spiritually innocent and sinless, Adam and Eve knew an intimacy with God that we can only imagine (Genesis 3:8). They were in perfect harmony with their Creator and with one another (Genesis 2:25). He gave them life and provided for their every need. He was their daily companion, their friend, and he dearly loved them. In Eden all things were possible, and only a single behavior was forbidden; they were told never to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they did, God said that they would die (Genesis 2:17). Questioning the heart of God, Adam and Eve chose to sin, and everything changed. Instead of being in a harmonious, loving relationship with their Creator, they now feared him and hid (Genesis 3:8). Spiritually, they were separated from him. God removed his protective hand and cast them

out of Eden, leaving them and their descendants at the mercy of unrestrained environmental and biological processes that would wreak havoc on their bodies and minds. Sin brought disorder, disease, and death into the world (Romans 5:12-14; 8:18-25).

At conception, we are all separated from God and physically damaged as a result of original sin (Psalm 51:5).<sup>3</sup> Our spiritual condition is identical; we are all dead in our sins, unable to know God. Physically, however, the effects of sin vary in our bodies from minor bodily annoyances to major debilitating abnormalities. Can this reality be reconciled with a good God who is intimately involved in the creation of each human being? God creates each individual, much like Adam and Eve, whole and complete, as he would have them be within his perfect will (Psalm 139:13-16). He also endows them with unique talents and gifts so they might fulfill their divine purpose (Jeremiah 29:11). God does not create disease or disorder within our bodies. The Scriptures tell us that the physical creation is damaged by sin and longs for the day of redemption (Romans 8:20-22). God, because he is just, allows the consequence of original sin to run its course, which results in the disorder, disease, and death we face here on earth. I'll be the first to say that I don't fully understand it all or why it is this way. However, I do know that recognizing how intimately God is involved in the creation of each child with a developmental or psychological disorder should transform the way they are seen and treated by those around them.

## **THE EYES OF CHRIST**

A child with a developmental or psychological disorder is not some cosmic accident or mistake of nature. Some in the world may think of them that way, but God certainly doesn't. Sadly, even the church has struggled in ministering to these hurting children and their families.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus and a man disabled from birth have an interaction that gives us insight into not only how Jesus sees those struggling with a disorder but also how we should respond in the midst of suffering (John 9:1-3): "As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked Him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?'" Jesus' disciples assumed that sin was the cause of the man's blindness. In fact, as we can see from their question, they believed that the man may have sinned before he was born and brought this punishment upon himself. This was a common belief of the day; sin or unrighteousness brought punishment (e.g., sickness, poverty, a physical handicap) while righteous living brought health and prosperity. There is an ugly sense of self-righteousness in that theology. But what does Jesus say? "Jesus answered, 'It was neither *that* this man sinned, nor his parents; but *it was so that* the works of God might be displayed in him.'" This outcast, this "cursed" man, this sinner was blind from birth so the works of God might be displayed in him? Jesus then shows us how grace is to be extended to those struggling with a

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