WONDER

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52 Conversations to Help Kids Fall in Love With Scripture

A Grown-Up's Guide to Exploring
the Bible With Children

YOUR KID ASKS

IF JESUS ALREADY WON, THEN WHY DOESN'T IT SEEM LIKE IT?

This is a paradox that has confused Christians for thousands of years. The New Testament is pretty clear—the kingdom of God is here, present tense—and yet, when we look around it sure doesn't seem like it. About seventy years ago the theologian George Eldon Ladd used the phrase "already, but not yet" to describe the kingdom—that it is at the same time "already" here and "not yet" fully expressed in the way it will be one day.

Sure, your kid says, *but why?* One way to approach this with kids is to emphasize that God is not ever going to *force* someone to live in God's kingdom. It *has to be* freely chosen or else it's not God's kingdom at all, because that's not how our God does things. Jesus' announcement is not "The kingdom is here, so now you're all going to be forced to fall in line." That's not the sort of King Jesus is (unlike all the other kings/gods). Instead, the announcement is "The kingdom of God is here." What if you were to choose to live as if that were true? You'd find it's a much, much better place to live. We get to say yes to that invitation, but many people say no. Many people choose to keep on living the old way, as if the kingdom weren't here, and God lets them.

YOUR KID ASKS

IF THERE'S A GOOD AND POWERFUL GOD, WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN, ESPECIALLY TO PEOPLE WHO ARE TRYING TO FOLLOW GOD?

Kids notice the ways the world falls short of the goodness and justice of God, and they ask the very fair question: What's up with that?

When the young Church encounters organized, violent persecution for the first time, we have an opportunity to touch on one possible way of addressing this question. As has been the case in previous times we've tackled this topic, what follows is *not comprehensive*. With something this big and weighty, it's best to come at it from different angles at different times, each time saying something true in a way your kid can understand without overwhelming them with everything at once.

So here is *an* answer, not *the* answer.

In the story told in Acts, the young Church encounters opposition from the religious leaders of the day, who are angry that these Christians keep talking about this Jesus guy. Between the lines of the story, you can see the Church wrestling with the question of why this is happening to them, as well as why God isn't doing more to protect them from it. They are facing pain, sometimes violence, precisely *because* they are following Jesus.

Let's set this alongside two other stories from the Bible (I could pick out more, but for the sake of the word count, I'll limit to these two). The first is Jesus' crucifixion. The second is the story of Joseph in Genesis.

In all three cases, we have people who trust God and are following God as best they can. In all three cases painful, sometimes violent, things happen. How should we think about that? Let's look at some common features:

First, in all three stories, God is not *causing* the pain. The bad things that happen are the result of outside forces, whether you want to describe those as individual people doing bad things (lowercase sin) or societal structures that bring about injustice and violence (uppercase Sin). Some large chunk of the blame for the ways this world falls short of the goodness and justice of God should be laid at the feet of humans and sin/Sin.

God has given humans real responsibility and real choice, and when humans choose poorly that has real-life consequences for them and for the world around them. When bad things happen where this is clearly a factor, talk about that with your kid: *"I know it's hard that this has happened. God chooses to give people the ability to make choices, and sometimes they make bad choices that hurt other people. I think God wishes things like this didn't happen, too, but God isn't going to control us and force us to make good choices."*

Second, God is not sitting back and allowing these things to happen because God doesn't care. The Bible shows us that God cares deeply about injustice, and is just as sad about it as we are.

What we see in all three stories is that one way God responds to bad things happening is by being with us through them. The Bible never promises that God will stop bad things from happening; it does promise that God will be *with us* in the midst of them.

That's a refrain in the story of Joseph: God was with him. It's something emphasized in Acts as well: the presence of God with the Church through it all. If we look for and lean into God's presence in the midst of trouble, we will find that the same is true for us. It doesn't make the bad less bad, but it does give us strength to endure it. Whenever something painful is happening, we can encourage our kids to look for God's presence with them in the middle of it.

And then finally: **In each of these stories we see the good news of the resurrection: that our God is a God who consistently brings life out of death.** In Jesus' story, this is literal, of course. But we see it in Joseph saying to his brothers that they had meant to do evil to him, but God had used it for good. We see it in the ways the persecution of the church is the catalyst that pushes the gospel out of Jerusalem, in the process bringing life to the wider world.

It's crucial here to remember, ***this doesn't make the bad things into good things***. The things that happened were still bad. Throwing your brother Joseph into a pit and selling him into slavery? Bad. Crucifying Jesus? Bad. Throwing the early Christians into jail, beating them, and sometimes killing them because of their faith in Jesus? Bad. No good that God brings out of those situations changes that.

The amazing power of our God is shown not in pretending that bad things are actually good if you squint hard enough. The power is in God's ability to take even the darkest of situations and bring life *even there*. Our God is a God of resurrection life, and we can therefore expect the same in our times of trouble. This expectation sometimes requires patience, because the good that God will bring out of whatever situation sometimes takes a long time to manifest. When appropriate, we can use stories of how God has done this in our own lives to help our kids trust that God will do the same for them.