



EXCERPT



## **Grace for the Children**

*Finding Hope in the Midst of Child and Adolescent Mental Illness*

December 17, 2019 | \$20, 250 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4576-7

The church's response to child and adolescent mental health disorders has too often been characterized by fear and misinformation rather than grace or wisdom. Psychologist Matthew Stanford educates Christians about a range of common mental health disorders—from both scientific and biblical perspectives—so that the church may offer young people hope, a holistic view of human nature, accessible care, and supportive community.

## **Facing Childhood Mental Disorders with Grace**

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 disorder. First, he touched the man to relieve his physical suffering, and later, after the man is mocked, humiliated, and thrown out by the Pharisees (John 9:13-34), Jesus seeks him out and reveals to the man that he is the Messiah (John 9:35-39). The man is transformed both physically and spiritually. Christ's call to the church is no different today.

We are to relieve physical and psychological suffering while revealing the unconditional love and limitless grace that is available through a personal relationship with Jesus. We must not allow a child or a family to be defined by a disorder. Instead, we need to see with spiritual eyes, with Christ's eyes. He sees these beloved children as bearers of the divine image, created for his glory. Every trial, every malady, every weakness is yet another opportunity for the works of God to be manifest in their lives (and ours) because God is sovereign over illness and disorder, even mental illnesses and disorders. For example, in my thirty years of working with those living with mental illness, I have met countless Christ-followers whose faith was challenged but strengthened by a mental-health crisis in their family. Many of those same individuals have gone on to become mental-health advocates, peer counselors, and therapists sharing the love of Christ by serving other families who are now walking the same difficult path.

When parents realize that something is wrong, it can feel like a punch in the gut. All the hopes and dreams they had for their child seem lost. It is not uncommon for parents to go through a range of emotions from anger to guilt, from fear to joy. Some find themselves questioning their religious beliefs and feel angry with God, while others find that their faith is all they have left to sustain them. These thoughts and feelings are not wrong or sinful but are simply part of normal grieving. Grieving after loss is a God-ordained process that Jesus himself went through during his earthly ministry.

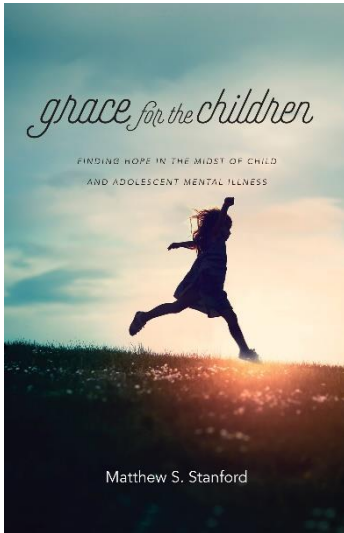


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After learning of his cousin John's (the Baptist) death, the Scriptures tell us Jesus got into a boat and went off to a secluded place to be alone (Matthew 14:13). The crowds often followed Jesus, and after sometime, Jesus returned to find the crowds waiting for him. Jesus was full of compassion and ministered to the sick and later miraculously fed at least five thousand people. Throughout the Bible, grieving is seen as an important process after loss. Learning about a child's mental disorder is cause for grieving. In a very real sense the child the parents had joyfully anticipated and imagined is lost. God knows they need time to properly grieve because through this process they will receive comfort, grow in intimacy with him, and continue on with their life transformed forever.

Grieving is a process with a number of stages: denial ("This can't be happening"), anger ("God, why did you let this happen?"), bargaining ("Heal my child and in return I will \_\_\_\_"), depression ("I can't go on anymore"), and acceptance ("I'm at peace with the circumstances"). Not everyone who is grieving goes through all of these stages, nor do the stages necessarily occur in the order I have listed them. A parent does not have to go through each stage in order to be healed. Healing happens gradually; it can't be forced or hurried—and there is no normal timetable for grieving.

During the grieving process, it is important for us to remember that God is faithful and present in our pain (Job 33:13-28). We don't have to fully understand God's role in the situation, but we must simply recognize he is present. Be honest with him. If you're angry, tell him. He can take it. If you feel overwhelmed, cry out to your Father. Lean on fellow believers, not to fix you or the situation but to be a listening ear as you vent your pain and disappointment. Let them bring you comfort, encouragement, and practical advice. Let them rejoice with you in the victories! Remember, Jesus took time to grieve and afterwards was compassionate to give to those who so desperately needed him. Give yourself the same grace so you might show compassion and recognize that God has great plans for you.

God places children with developmental and psychological disorders in our lives in accordance with his will and for a divine purpose. As believers in Christ, he has also equipped us with all the love, patience, and wisdom necessary to support and raise them (2 Thessalonians 3:5). At times that may seem impossible, but remember we have been transformed by the indwelling of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 5:17), and all things are possible through Christ (Philippians 4:13). This is an opportunity for you to grow closer to him! A child may have greater cognitive and physical needs than most children but has the same spiritual needs that everyone has, including you—intimacy with Christ. Parents have been given the honor of training this child in Christ. God has a great purpose and plan for all children's lives, just as he does for yours.

As a community of believers, we must not withdraw from or ignore childhood mental disorders but instead choose to face them with God's grace and wisdom. Christ said that they would know we are his disciples because of our love for one another (John 13:35). Where better for children, whether they have a mental disorder or not, to look for love and acceptance than the church? Where better for parents to go for support and comfort than the body of Christ? As a community of faith, our approach to mental disorders should be one of love and grace.

—From chapter one, "A Gift and a Reward"

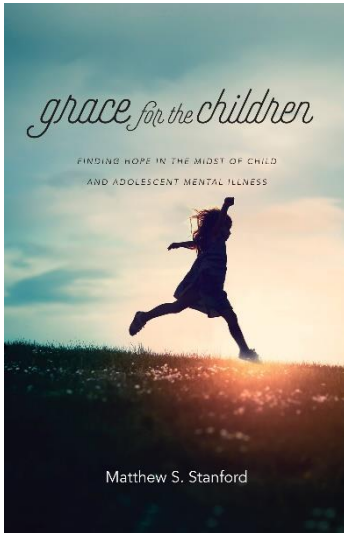


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## Q & A



### **Grace for the Children**

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*“Grace for the Children is an excellent and comprehensive clinical guide for finding hope in the midst of child and adolescent mental illness. It covers autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, disruptive behavior disorders, depressive disorders, bipolar disorders, anxiety disorders, PTSD, OCD and related disorders, and eating disorders. It also includes helpful spiritual and biblical perspectives.”*

**Siang-Yang Tan**, professor of psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary

## Hope for Childhood and Adolescent Mental Illness

### What particular need are you addressing in *Grace for the Children*?

**Matthew S. Stanford:** In the United States today a majority of people with mental health problems receive no treatment. Surprisingly individuals in psychological distress are more likely to go to a clergy member before they engage a mental health care provider or physician. This gives the church a divine opportunity to minister to these broken individuals and lead them to the care they so desperately need. *Grace for the Children* focuses on mental disorders in children and adolescents and is a follow-up to my book *Grace for the Afflicted*.

### Why did you decide to write a follow-up to *Grace for the Afflicted*?

**Matthew:** Since the publication of *Grace for the Afflicted* I have received countless emails, letters, and phone calls from desperate parents across the country seeking Christ-centered information and counsel related to their children’s developmental and psychiatric disorders. While *Grace for the Afflicted* focused exclusively on adult psychiatric disorders, *Grace for the Children* presents information on mental disorders in children and adolescents.

### Why do so many people with mental disorders, including children and adolescents, not get treatment?

**Matthew:** For those struggling with a mental disorder, even in one of the world’s richest and most developed countries, obtaining proper care is hindered by a wide range of barriers that are difficult and oftentimes impossible to overcome. Too few mental health care professionals, a shortage of psychiatric facilities, no transportation, limited financial resources, a lack of knowledge and education, stigma and shame, and misguided cultural beliefs all serve as significant barriers to individuals trying to access care. This inability to access proper care leaves the afflicted and their families confused, frustrated, and hopeless.

### What do you hope readers will take away from this book?

**Matthew:**

- There is real hope for children and adolescents diagnosed with a mental disorder.
- God is present and active in the lives of children and families struggling with mental illness.
- The church has a significant role to play in mental health recovery.

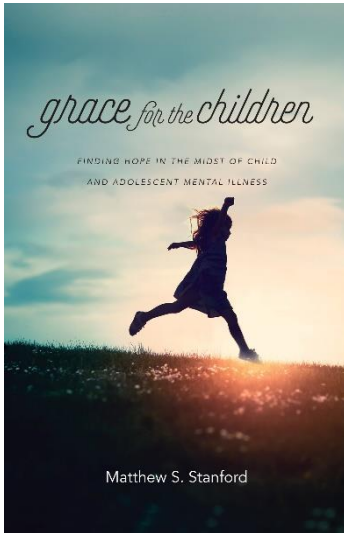


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*"The topic of mental illness is almost taboo in far too many churches today, yet hurting people sit in our pews. There is nothing more frightening to a parent than to watch a child struggle with mental illness, causing out-of-control behavior, mood swings, and public embarrassment. In Grace for the Children, Dr. Matthew Stanford encourages parents while educating the church on how to love and minister to children and teens with a mental illness."*

**Janet Parshall**, nationally syndicated talk show host

### **What are some practical ways the church can help with mental health recovery?**

**Matthew:** If churches would simply train their staff to be able to recognize mental illness and build relationships with local mental health care providers, then clergy would become effective mental health gatekeepers and access to the system would be increased. In addition, a few practical ways that churches could better minister to those struggling with mental health problems include:

- As a faith community, decide to pray in a general way each week for anyone who is struggling with a mental or emotional disorder.
- Invite congregants living with mental illness or caring for a mentally ill loved one to write down their particular spiritual and emotional needs. Read these during the weekly prayers.
- Prepare sermons that acknowledge the struggle experienced by those with mental illness.
- Invite a member of the church who has struggled with mental illness to share his or her story with the congregation.
- Place brochures and other sources of information regarding mental illness and available resources in the back of the church or in the pews.
- Invite a mental health professional to speak or offer a seminar.



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*"I'm thankful for Matt Stanford's heart for the hurting. In *Grace for the Children*, he shows us a path forward to meeting the needs of children and families affected by mental illness. With a deep knowledge of the field and a solid Christian commitment, *Grace for the Children* will bring the hope, encouragement, and direction you need."*

**Ed Stetzer**, Billy Graham Professor of Church, Mission, and Evangelism, Wheaton College

## **Expert on Interplay Between Psychology and Faith**

**Matthew S. Stanford** (PhD, Baylor University) is CEO of the Hope and Healing Center & Institute in Houston, Texas, and he teaches in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Baylor College of Medicine and the Department of Psychology at the University of Houston. He is the author of *Grace for the Afflicted: A Clinical and Biblical Perspective on Mental Illness* and *The Biology of Sin: Grace, Hope and Healing for Those Who Feel Trapped*.

Stanford is the cofounder and served as the executive director of the Grace Alliance, a faith-based, nonprofit mental health organization that provides services and support to individuals living with serious mental illness and their families. Stanford is an international speaker, and his research on the interplay between psychology and faith has been featured in publications including the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Christianity Today*, as well as websites such as Fox, MSNBC, Yahoo, and *US News & World Report*.

Stanford is a member of the American Psychological Association and a fellow of the Association for Psychological Science, where he is the author of over one hundred peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters in psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience. He also serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Family and Community Ministries* and *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*. He is a member of the Southern Baptist Convention's Mental Health Advisory Group and the American Bible Society's Trauma Healing Institute Advisory Council.

He and his wife, Julie, have four children and reside in Houston, Texas.



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