

When Your Family Life Is Harder Than It Should Be

Yesterday was a day at the beach, since that's what you do when you stay with friends in Florida over Spring Break. With our oldest daughter home with her young children, two of our kids in college, and our high schooler on a mission trip, it was just Jenifer, 7-year-old Maddie Kate, and me.

It was a warm day and I had just gotten settled into the perfect spot. My beach chair was positioned perfectly under the shade of my umbrella. I was within arm's reach of a cold drink and a magazine. My feet had dug a few inches down into the sugary white sand of the Emerald Coast. I was just about to let out an audible, "Ahhhhhhhhhhh" when Maddie Kate called out to me.

"Let's dig a hole in the sand."

We had dug holes every day for the past three days. I didn't want to dig any more holes. Because we would dig a hole and then we would leave it, moving on to the next pursuit of a bored 7-year-old: building a castle or walking down the beach or splashing in the freezing cold water or chasing sea gulls or looking for shells or digging more holes.

I was tired. I just wanted to sit in my chair and have a vacation experience that feels at least a little bit like a Zac Brown song. Maddie Kate was getting in the way of that and I was beginning to feel resentful. It reminded me of something I had written a while back about my child being an inconvenience. But of course, I did what any decent parent would do: I got up and dug a hole in the sand. We stopped a few meters short of China.

A bit later, I had a chance to read a few chapters from Donald Miller's new book, *Scary Close*. It's all about finding true

intimacy in our relationships. In a chapter about laying down our need to be in control, God spoke to me through Miller's words:

"God doesn't give us crying, pooping children because He wants to advance our careers. He gives them to us for the same reason he confused language at the Tower of Babel, to create chaos and deter us from investing too much energy in the gluttonous idols of self-absorption."

Those few sentences stung a little bit.

This was God's reminder to me of why He allows the lives of imperfect and normal families like ours to be difficult at times. It is because He loves us. He doesn't want any of us to waste time striving to make ourselves happy through pursuing our own self-centered desires. Because He knows that doing so won't result in any true or lasting joy.

Think about it: How many happy AND self-absorbed people do you know?

If God does that with our kids then he certainly does it in our marriages. If we run from difficulty or bail out on a marriage that is hard in pursuit of our own happiness, we will likely miss out on a great opportunity to learn selflessness and godliness, the very things that God wants for us. Like nothing else, these are the things that will give us that "ahhhhhhhh" feeling we are all looking for. John Eldridge wrote about this in his book *Wild at Heart*.

Eldridge described coaching a friend who was on the verge of leaving his wife of 20 years for a woman he used to date in college. John's friend argued that his wife was incredibly complex and thus, hard to love. In contrast, his old girlfriend was carefree and thus, easy to love. In his mind, his soul would thrive if he got a divorce and married his old girlfriend. John's response was to ask something like, "Which of these two women will most require you to depend upon God

and step up as a man?" The answer should be obvious to us all.

Sometimes, God allows bad things to happen to our families and even within our relationships so that He can get to work on our hearts. While this work is never fun or easy, it is proof that God is with us, not evidence that He has abandoned us.

This point is critical and it depends on us: our response to the difficulty will make or break God's ultimate work in our lives. We can embrace the trial or bail out for what we hope will be greener pastures. (The grass always looks greener on the other side of the fence, but that's usually because there's more poop over there.)

All this speaks a deeper truth that I don't like hearing.

The God who loves me and who is committed to my ultimate joy is NOT particularly concerned with my comfort or short-term happiness. He is most committed to my sanctification, that gradual process of making me more like Jesus. He knows that when I come to depend more on Him, and thus become more like Him, my life will be full. That means He will sometimes, in His sovereign will, allow bad things to happen in my marriage and family life.

The very things that my flesh wants to run from (hardship, pain, conflict) are the very things that have the power to change me for the better. Think about it: when was the last time your heart and character were powerfully transformed during a comfortable and easy season of life? It just doesn't work that way.

I don't wish hardship or pain on any person. God doesn't either. I pray for grace and endurance for those whom I know who are currently in the middle of a devastating trial. But we live in a sinful, fallen world where we regularly experience the effects of the fall: sickness, death, and even seemingly impossible relationships. God could whisk all the pain away,

or He can allow us to experience it so that we can become more like Jesus to a world that so desperately needs to see His redemption power at work in our lives.

That's His plan. And He promises that it will result in His glory and in our joy. Let's welcome that into our lives instead of running from it.

I have to go now. There's an over-active 7-year old waiting on me to dig a hole with her.

Adapted from , a ministry founded by Barrett and Jenifer Johnson. After serving in the local church for 25 years, Barrett and Jenifer launched INFO for Families as a ministry designed to encourage people through speaking, personal coaching and resource development. Barrett served for 15 years in youth ministry before serving for 8 years as the Family Minister at Johnson Ferry Baptist Church in Atlanta, one of the largest churches in the South. He has degrees from Texas A&M University and Southwestern Seminary, but he and Jenifer have received their best education through the no-holds-barred nature of everyday family life.