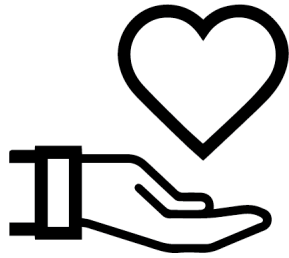




C♥MPASSION

6 PART DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

By Alison Lublink & Kersten Rieder



PART 1: What is Compassion?

Read: Psalm 86:15, 1 Peter 3:8

Ponder:

When we open the Bible to learn about compassion, we're faced with dozens of references to this very topic. We learn that we should be compassionate to others; that God is compassionate to humanity; we see people crying out for compassion. So what *is* compassion? At its very core, it is the sensitivity to the suffering of ourselves and others. It's the desire to help ease the suffering, whether that's experienced in our lives or in the lives of others.

As one can imagine, Jesus is the ultimate example of compassion. Not only did he have compassion on many people as he travelled through the countryside; but he also had so much compassion on humanity, that he was willing to give up his life for us, that we might be saved. Now *that* is compassion.

While it's unlikely that any of us will lay down our lives for the sake of someone else, it is likely that we will be faced with scenarios that cause us to choose whether or not we will have compassion. It seems that there are varying degrees to which each one of us might feel compelled to

respond with compassion. For example, you pass a homeless person on the street begging for money - do you have compassion and give them a few dollars? Or, say, your grandchild falls off their bike and skins their knee - do you have compassion and wash out the cut and bandage it up?

Now, you might suggest that those examples are like comparing apples and oranges; and maybe you're right. But it still remains that in both circumstances we will choose whether to have compassion or not based on a lot of determining factors.

When Precious was born, her mother was only in her second year of high school. She wasn't quite prepared for the responsibilities of parenthood, especially alone. Precious was born a little underweight, but there was a more pressing concern: an enlarged tongue. This condition is known as macroglossia. It meant that Precious had a difficult time feeding. She spent so much time in and out of the hospital trying to get help.

The condition also made things difficult socially in her village. In fact, she became the girl "with the tongue sticking out." People from around the area would come just to see her and gawk. Truly awful. The exact opposite of compassionate. Things became so bad Precious was eventually abandoned by her mom and raised by her Grandmother.

Her grandmother was determined to help Precious.

After visiting a number of hospitals, Precious' grandmother finally found *BethanyKids* where Precious was able to receive multiple surgeries to reduce her tongue and help her properly close her mouth. Surgeries that only happened because her grandmother, the surgeons, the staff and donors halfway around the world chose to have compassion towards someone.

Discuss:

1. How would you personally define compassion from a biblical perspective? Do you think that this definition is similar/different to the world's definition of compassion?
2. Think of a time that someone was compassionate to you. What were the circumstances?
3. How does it make you feel when someone shows you compassion?
4. Is compassion something that comes naturally to you? Why or why not?

Pray: Be gracious to me, O Lord. Allow me to show others the same unhindered compassion that you have shown to me. Let me not be stifled by my own limits or concerns, but rather overflowing with compassionate love for all those that cross my path.

Do: This week look for ways to show compassion - whether big or small - to those around you. Perhaps lend a listening ear to someone who is experiencing difficulties; buy a meal for a struggling family; donate to a worthy cause, such as *BethanyKids*.



Part 2: Sensitivity to Others

Read: 1 Kings 3:7-12, Philippians 1:9-11

Ponder:

Part of being compassionate is being sensitive to people and situations around us. While we're hard-pressed to find specific references to "sensitivity" in the Bible, it does reference "discernment" a lot. Discernment is linked to sensitivity, and both imply a sense of listening and sensing what to do and when.

In the suggested reading passage of 1 Kings, Solomon is told to ask God for whatever he wants - kind of like sending Santa Claus your Christmas wishlist! But of all the things he could ask for, Solomon prays for a discerning heart. This is a beautiful request.

When we are discerning, or sensitive, it is when we are able to recognize the suffering of others. For some of us, this is easy and comes naturally. For others of us, it is not until someone comes to us asking for help that we realize they were in trouble all along. Flexing our discernment muscles to be sensitive to the needs of others is something we should continually work on. So how can we do this?

Firstly, it's important that we not get caught up in all of the brokenness around us, believing that there is only *bad* that needs to be made *good*. Rather, it's helpful to start looking for good in absolutely every situation. Mr. Rogers is famous for the quote "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" I think that applies here as well. If we look for the *good*, we will start to discern how we can help make the *bad*, better.

Another way to cultivate discernment is to invest in things and relationships that will last.

Evalyne was 10 years old, young and vibrant when she arrived at *BethanyKids*. However, Evalyne was born with a congenital abnormality which caused her to have a colostomy at a local hospital when she was only one month old. Of course her parents hoped that something could be done for her, but it seemed that nothing else was possible locally or financially.

Evalyne was an excellent student and so social! But as she began to realize she wasn't quite the same as all the other kids, she started to withdraw and eventually refused to go to school. She was so worried of what would happen if the other kids found out about her health condition.

Her older brother was sensitive to Evalyne's situation. He was so worried about his younger sister's future. The sensitivity he had to Evalyne's condition was something that spurred him on to eventually find *BethanyKids* via their church pastor. This ended up providing Evalyne with surgery and the ability to function like any other child.

We are so thankful that her brother was present in Evalyne's life and was sensitive to her needs.

Discuss:

1. Do you naturally see the good in situations, and think of ways to help? If so, share some examples. If not, how can you start working on that?
2. Think of a time in your life when someone helped you - what was the most meaningful aspect of their help? How can you transfer that to your relationships with others?
3. How can you pay better attention to the words and actions of those around you?
4. Identify some of the "helpers" that are at work in tragedies around the world.

Pray: God, I ask that you would give me a discerning heart, like Solomon. I pray that you would help me to be sensitive to the needs of others and act accordingly. Give me humility to know that I cannot do this on my own. I need you.

Do: Try discern the good in every situation. Try writing a letter to a "helper" to someone that is trying to do good. This might be someone in your neighbourhood or someone that you've never met. For example, why not send a letter to a surgeon or clinician helping through *BethanyKids*? You can do that by sending it to peter@bethanykids.org.



Part 3: Sympathy for Suffering

Read: Psalm 69:20, 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Ponder:

Have you ever felt in such despair and wondered why no one cared about the trials you were going through? It seems that's how David was feeling in Psalm 69 when he was looking for sympathy and comfort and found none. I think at some point we have all had a pity party, whether it was warranted or not.

When we hear the word "sympathy" it's often associated with grief, loss, death. But we don't need to reserve our sympathy for just those moments. Part of having sympathy for someone or something is understanding the commonality of human suffering. This is another aspect of compassion.

It's healthy for us to look at someone or a situation and have sympathy - that is, to recognize that we all have suffering and we are all suffering together. We are not immune, and neither are they.

We need to support one another through suffering.

However, we must remember that supporting in sympathy doesn't always mean solving someone's problems for them. Supporting in sympathy can mean acknowledging and comforting what they are going through; sharing the experience.

Julia Ruto is a Parent Mentor at *BethanyKids*. She has spent a lot of time in hospitals over the years. Her daughter, Diana, was born with spina bifida and hydrocephalus. Julia has experienced nine long years of waiting rooms, surgeries, poking and prodding. She is now able to use this experience to help comfort other parents whose children are experiencing similar challenges.

It is incredibly scary to have a child in the hospital, and it is Julia's role to help other parents sort through those fears and frustrations. If the parents are able to process their own struggles, then they can better care for their children.

At *BethanyKids* we are so grateful that Julia is there to support our clients through sympathy.

Discuss:

1. When are you most observant? How can observing help in regards to sympathy?
2. When someone shares their struggles with you, do you find yourself sitting with sympathy, or jumping to help solve their problems? Why do you think this is?
3. Have you ever experienced sympathy from someone? What aspects of it were helpful, and what could you have done without?
4. What are your personal biases that get in the way of you having sympathy for someone or situations?

Pray: I ask you, God, to help me to sympathize with all those around me, whether I know them or not. You are the God of all comfort. Give me a heart for showing that same comfort, recognizing that we all share in our sufferings.

Do: Practice being present this week in the lives of those around you. Listen, observe and aim to show sympathy in ways that are gentle and compassionate. Don't rush to solve problems right away; rather sit with them in their discomfort, and *show* them that you care by being there for them.



Part 4: Feeling for the Person Suffering

Read: Micah 6:8; Romans 12:15

Ponder:

Although they are similar, empathy takes compassion a step further from sympathy: it is the ability to not only share the afflicted person's feelings, but to identify with them. A common turn of phrase describes it as putting yourself in someone else's shoes and walking a mile in them. The ability to be empathetic comes easier to some than others, in part because it makes us vulnerable to the same suffering and discomfort the afflicted person is experiencing. However, it also helps us understand each other, shares the burden and lets them know they are not alone. This is why empathy is a powerful emotion that can bring hope, comfort and healing to someone else during difficult times. The Bible actively encourages us to engage with each other empathetically, by celebrating the highs of life, but also fully engaging with the lows. Empathy has the ability to bind us together and see each other's reality with new eyes.

This is what Dr. Eric Irungu experienced during his time as a first year general surgery resident at Kijabe. Before then he rarely interacted with pediatric surgical patients. During a two-month rotation in that department, his heart was flooded with empathy for the babies and how they suffered with complex congenital anomalies. He also became acquainted with the parents' struggles, especially as many took long journeys upon themselves to receive medical help. Some came from as far as Rwanda, Burundi and Sierra Leone. The more he engaged with the children, the more he realised their needs were different and more complex than those of adults. He felt prompted by God to switch from his general surgery residency program to pediatric surgery, because of his compassion and deep empathy for his patients.

Empathy has the ability to move us into action when injustice and suffering abound - and therein lies its true power.

Discuss

1. Think of a time someone showed empathy towards you. How did that make you feel?
2. Are you naturally empathetic? In what situations do you find yourself empathizing most with others? Do you find it helpful when someone identifies with your feelings?
3. What scares you about being empathetic?
4. Does empathy cause you to withdraw or spring into action? Why do you think that is?

Pray: Lord, soften my heart to the plight of others. Let me feel what they feel, to help them feel understood and not alone. Strengthen my ability to be vulnerable so I can serve others. Show me where my empathy can be channeled and used for good and change in this suffering world.

Do: This week, actively empathize with another person. This may be a friend, or someone who you've struggled to empathize with in the past. Put yourself in their shoes and open yourself up to the vulnerability that arises. Let this person know that you've been thinking of them, and that they are not alone, offering an empathetic, listening ear.



Part 5: Tolerating Uncomfortable Feelings

Read: Psalm 34:18; John 11:35

Ponder:

People often default to a defensive position when feelings get too uncomfortable. We either try to ignore them or fight them off. Other times we distract ourselves. Whatever the strategy, our end goal is to somehow push the emotions away, simply because they are too painful.

However, actually *experiencing* those emotions can be a good and healthy thing. Often our fear of being vulnerable gets in the way - and this fear is sometimes worse than tolerating the emotion itself. Practicing allowing emotions to wash over us is not an easy task, and it takes patience and courage to sit with them or not look away.

Tolerating uncomfortable emotions is also a form of self-compassion: you are acknowledging your vulnerability, admitting things are tough or uncomfortable, graciously accepting that this is your emotional reality. Psalm 34 describes that we are never alone while tolerating suffering, because in those moments God is especially close. In John's

Gospel we read about a moment how Jesus dealt with his own emotions surrounding the death of Lazarus: he stopped and wept for his friend, allowing space for the feelings of grief and suffering. He did this despite knowing what his healing power could do.

Knowing that suffering is coming and tolerating the discomfort is a mark of great strength and bravery. Juanita's story is a reflection of that. As a pregnant teenager in Liberia, she knew her life would not be easy. Her family was supportive, but Juanita faced judgment from her peers and elders. She describes giving birth as the most painful thing she'd ever imagined, far more brutal than the pain from whips and chains. Tolerating those feelings was an immense challenge, but the moment she looked into her daughter's eyes, that newfound love and relief was worth it. Even when Georgeline was diagnosed with spina bifida and faced a world of pain, Juanita never lost hope. Spina bifida is a condition where the spinal cord hasn't fully closed, causing possible paralysis, pressure on the skull and poor bowel and bladder control. Juanita and Georgeline faced hurtful comments, stares and labels from others, on top of the fact that no specialists in the country were able to operate. But she kept fighting for her daughter, leading to a miracle where they ended up in the capable hands at *BethanyKids* Kenya and Georgeline received the necessary surgery. Throughout this painful journey, Juanita has shown courage, resilience and the self-compassion necessary to see her daughter through. This life-changing experience has shown her that they are not alone - perhaps the greatest gift of all.

Discuss:

1. When was the last time you sat with uncomfortable feelings? Do you tend to shy away from them, or actively engage? Was that helpful to what you were processing?
2. What aspect is more daunting to you: knowing that there would be pain, or the suffering itself?
3. Why is it important to be self-compassionate?
4. Can you recall a time you allowed emotions to run freely and felt comforted by God? What did you learn? What surprised you?

Pray: Lord, give us courage to tolerate uncomfortable feelings. Draw close to us when our hearts are broken and the pain becomes unbearable. Help us to know we are not alone. Send us strength for those moments where we feel like giving up. Increase our capacity for self-compassion and grant us the necessary patience for this.

Do: Set aside time to just sit with yourself. Close your eyes and breathe through whatever comes to your mind. Then write down, journal or draw your thoughts - how did it make you feel? Why? Give yourself permission to reflect on and acknowledge each of the emotions.



Part 6: Alleviating Suffering

Read: Psalm 103: 1-4; Matthew 14:14

Ponder:

Compassion is a multi-faceted emotion and powerful motivator. When we are affected by what we see, hear and experience, we are often moved into action. In Psalm 103, David sings of a God who heals us and alleviates our suffering. His motivation is simply because he loves us. Matthew's Gospel describes Jesus seeing people afflicted by illness and healing them, because of the compassion he felt for them. Both instances speak of a God who is not blind to suffering and is moved into action by compassion.

Compassion is a dynamic emotion that motivates us to make a difference, and even alleviate suffering where we can.

When the *BethanyKids* mobile clinic team saw 8 year old Maxwell in extreme pain, their compassion motivated them to act quickly. He was diagnosed with hydrocephalus as a toddler, and the shunt to drain the excess fluid was no longer working. Maxwell's hands were squeezing his head,

hoping for relief, but his body was so swollen that the clinic team knew he was on the verge of death. They immediately transferred the boy to the *BethanyKids* Kijabe Hospital. On arrival a team of doctors and nurses worked to alleviate his suffering and stabilize him in the high acuity unit. Maxwell is now awaiting surgery to fix the blocked shunt. His mother praised *BethanyKids* and thanked them for faithfully walking this long and painful journey with them. Their compassion made a difference in Maxwell's life - he is on the road to recovery and no longer suffering.

Discuss

1. Have you ever practically alleviated someone's suffering? What motivated you to do so?
2. Is compassion always a dynamic emotion, in that it calls for some kind of action? Why or why not?
3. Has anyone ever alleviated your suffering? What can you learn from this approach?
4. How do we react when we cannot alleviate suffering? Are there other things we can do?

Pray: God, help me to see those who are suffering and increase my capacity to love and have compassion on them. Where I can make a difference, give me the opportunity to take action. Where I cannot act, help me to show compassion in another way. Open the eyes of my heart to the needs of your children.

Do: Practice compassion in action. Suffering can take on many forms. Some people suffer from loneliness or isolation - write them a letter or send them a token letting them know you are thinking of them. Invite them for coffee or tea. Others may suffer physically - offer to go grocery shopping, take care of a chore or simply ask if you can lend them a helping hand. You can also invest financial resources to support those who are alleviating suffering daily by donating to a worthy cause, such as *BethanyKids*.

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