

July 2022

# Days of Hope

*Passionately communicating the love of God to hurting kids in a gentle way*

## The Power of Volition By Jon Wells

The kids I have been working with this past month have reminded me how overwhelming and impossible their circumstances can seem. They are facing a strange world populated by state assigned social workers, judges, therapists, foster families, and staff members. Biological family is often uninvolved. The decision making process is complex and ponderous. Small adjustments take weeks or months to implement. No wonder these youth feel powerless to affect any real outcomes. In fact, most of the children and teens I encounter in residential facilities have a totally disconnected view of their own lives. They are floating through this season of life at the mercy of powerful currents, totally helpless to do anything.

When I ask kids if they need to pray about anything, this feeble perspective always seems to bubble to the service. Judges and administrators and foster parents are making decisions and these youth are shuffling along, forced to live with whatever imposed changes are coming their way. Every detail of their lives is out of their hands completely.

As the girls filed out of the chapel last week, one young lady made a passing comment that illustrated this point. "None of these are my clothes." She said. "Nothing you have seen me wear is mine. I don't have any clothes here, they just gave me this stuff so that I would have something."

I won't bore you with the specific details that explain how a teen girl would end up on campus with nothing more than the shirt on her back. But her comment was no surprise. This is just how the system works. These kids own nothing.

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# The Why behind the Cross

By Logan Stark

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life - John 3:16*

On Easter Sunday, Pastor Jon and I were able to have a special chapel for the kids at Great Circle. The morning consisted of Easter Olympics, Peeps, and a real cooked rabbit (questionably cooked, so none of the kids were allowed to take a bite of it—though there were many who wanted to try it). However, the main message that Jon shared with the kids, was that Easter isn't about eggs and rabbits, but the sacrifice of Jesus.

"But why did he do it?" asked one of the boys. "Why was he willing to die?"

Why did he do it? Was he obligated to? Did the Father force Jesus? Was he just bored of the harp playing in heaven? Why did Jesus die?

This is a tough question to think about. Why would the darling of heaven be willing to leave paradise, where angels worship him, to come to earth? Why be surrounded by thieves, liars, prostitutes, and sinners? Why submit himself to be challenged by ignorant religious leaders, betrayed by his people? Why come to earth knowing that he was to be whipped, before being nailed to a cross? Why did he do it?

The Apostle John tells us why in his iconic verse, John 3:16—love. Love was the reason why Jesus was willing to leave heaven. Love was the reason why he was willing to be around sinners and tax collectors. Love was the reason why he was willing to be tortured and killed. Because he loves you, he was willing to die for your sins.

You are loved. You are loved by the King of kings and the Lord of lords. You are loved so much, that he was willing to die a horrific death so that your sins can be forgiven. Jesus loves you, and he wants you to love him back. All he wants, is for you to be wrapped in his blood, so he can live with you for eternity.



They don't pick their meals or mealtimes. They don't decide what to do on a daily basis. They cannot choose whether or not to communicate with a parent. They often cannot attend family funerals. They don't make phone calls when they want to speak with someone important. Living in the foster care system is an exercise in powerlessness and accommodation. On some deep level these kids are tattooed with the simple truth that they are completely unable to affect outcomes in their lives. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth.

It is no small irony that the only way out of this broken system is the disciplined practice of intentionally choosing a course and persevering in that choice. These kids need to recognize and exercise their own power to affect change. The best illustration of this dynamic is the physical restraint.

Physical restraints are an unfortunate necessity of the residential programming environment. In spite of multiple attempts at de-escalation, the staff are often forced to physically intervene with the youth they serve. So many of these kids need someone in the room to physically grab ahold of them and safely interrupt their actions. From the girl who is carving up her own skin with a sharp rock to the young man who snapped and started punching one of his peers, the need for physical intervention is often a daily occurrence. The kids hate these interactions for understandable reasons. More than once I have told them, "When you are in a hold, you are the boss. You are in charge of a hold." They laugh at that one; no one believes it.

"It is true." I insist. "That whole mess is over as soon as you say it is. You are the boss- settle down and chill a little bit- the staff will let you sit down and work through the problem. But if you are gonna just keep screaming obscenities, spitting, biting, and kicking, then guess what? . . . You are the boss, and this thing is just going to drag on."

It seems so counterintuitive. Being placed in a hold is perhaps the most powerless experience in a treatment program. Yet in that very moment, that child's intentional effort to calm down and resolve the conflict is the only thing that will stop the hold. Unfortunately, so

many of these kids are unable to see it- they fight and strive until they exhaust themselves.

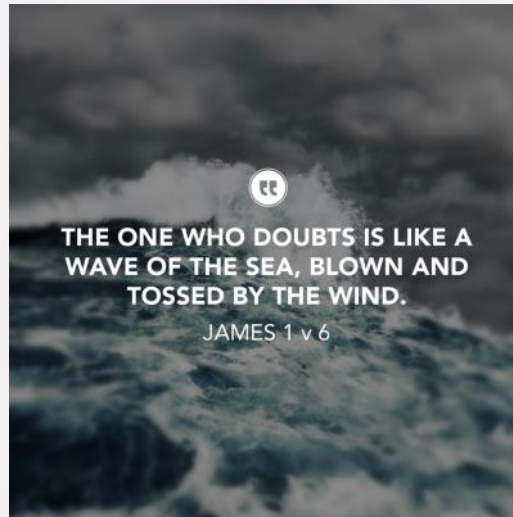
What is going on inside of a child during a physical restraint? Many of these kids have a history of physical or sexual abuse, and a physical restraint can trigger overwhelming memories and sensations of those ugly experiences from the past. Kids often enter into a state called 'limbic system overload.' Core areas at the base of the brain take over, the frontal cortex shuts down, and the child begins to respond on a reflexive level. This 'fight or flight'

response is a universal human response to overwhelming circumstances. It serves us well when a bear is chasing us in the woods. But it makes it almost impossible for a kid to deescalate and talk through a problem. Without our frontal cortex we lose logic, language, sequence, and rational thought. And in that moment, thrashing and screaming, the child is the boss. Their actions dictate the next steps that staff will take.

Think about it. Your volition- your choices and actions are the most powerful force in your world, and at the same moment you are deeply convinced

that you are powerless to do anything. Even if you did have the audacity to assume you could do something positive, the deck is stacked against you.

Any adult who has battled to maintain a healthy diet understands this dynamic. Addictions to alcohol or drugs carry the same impossible challenge. Are you caught in a disappointing marriage? An impossible financial outlook? A years-long dependence on the relief that the occasional cigarette brings? A dead end career? So many of the problems we face as adults look pretty much the same as those these kids are battling. The most significant part of your equation is your own positive choices and determined action, yet you feel powerless. You surrender the only thing that might turn the circumstance around. You surrender your volition- your will to choose and act in service of a better outcome. James adds one more ingredient to this recipe in the first chapter of his letter to the early church:



*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. **James 1:6-8***

Ask God! What should you do in an impossible situation? What should you say when you have no idea which way to turn? This is the very definition of faith; ask the invisible Creator expecting Him to answer. But notice that James adds a caveat to his encouragement. Don't just ask; follow up your request with a steadfast conviction that God will bring a good answer. 'Believe and do not doubt' James tells us. Then he paints the perfect picture of a lost kid in residential care. They are like a 'wave of the sea, tossed and blown by the wind . . . double minded and unstable in all they do.' Yeah, they sure are! What a great illustration of a powerless kid, flowing along with the tides, unable or unwilling to swim to shore. That is exactly the image of that little girl I spoke with the other night, wearing borrowed clothes and resigned to her impossible circumstances.

What about you? What circumstances in your life have you convinced that you are a victim? Which demons have cowed you into a sense of powerless ineptitude? Like David facing a belligerent Goliath, we desperately need a zeal to rise up from within. God, ignite a spark of faith deep in my weary soul that focuses on Your path forward with a relentless trust in victory. Rise up! Rise up!

Or don't. Just keep helplessly drifting. The choice is yours.