When Life Hands You Bananas . . .

My friend Jonathan Baker handed a banana and a knife to every student in his Bible classes at Puebla Christian School in Puebla, Mexico. He told them to cut up their bananas any way they wanted. Junior high boys pretty much decimated theirs while other students cut their bananas into large pieces.

Then Jonathan passed out cellophane tape and told them to put the bananas back together again. It was, of course, a mess. The students who had made neat cuts with their knives were able to reassemble their bananas, but even with tape it was clear they were in parts. The mashed bananas, needless to say, were hopeless. Even with tape.

Jonathan made the observation that our choices have consequences, and we can't ever go back to the way it was before we made our choices. No amount of tape can possibly make a banana whole again. We can certainly make a mess of our lives when we make bad choices and have to live with the consequences.

We cannot fix our bananas.

We cannot undo the damage we inflict on our bananas.

It's sad.

But then he went into the next room and brought out ice cream, chocolate syrup, nuts, whipped cream, cherries, bowls and spoons. With a smile, Jonathan said, "You can't do anything with cut up, mashed up bananas, but God can! He can make a banana split! He can take broken pieces of our lives, unfixable messes and painful consequences of bad choices, and make something sweet from them. He'll make something unimaginably more wonderful of our broken pieces—IF we'll let

Him."

I love that story. And I love how it hit the students' hearts with hope.

But there is another layer to my enjoyment of this story. Jonathan shared it with me in Puebla, where my husband and I are here for a week to teach some of Probe Ministries' Mind Games material at the school. We also spoke at a weekend conference where I shared "How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can't Change," my story of living with polio my whole life. (I was six months old when I contracted it, just a few months before the vaccine was developed.)

I learned that here in Mexico, as in many countries around the world, Americans are often dismissed as lightweights because surely we don't know anything about suffering. But when my audience could see me limp painfully and slowly to the podium, leaning on my cane, I had instant credibility. I could see it on their faces: *I guess she really does know something about suffering.*

The power of my message, that a good and loving God is in control so we can trust Him, has nothing to do with me and everything to do with God's grace. But first, my audience had to be open to receiving what I had to say. And once again, I saw how polio is God's good gift to me, to open the doors of people's hearts to hear what I have to say, so that it blesses them and honors God.

The banana of my broken body is being used for a spiritual banana split. And that is a sweet, sweet blessing. With a cherry on top!

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Think You Can Get Away With It?

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Several years ago I began to notice how many people buy into a disturbing fantasy.

First, I watched a dear friend jump into a sinful and dangerous relationship. She tried to numb her guilt through drugs, alcohol and self-injury, in escalating amounts of each. She ended up losing her job and her freedom—first in a hospital, then a psych ward, and then months in a rehab facility that consumed every penny of her considerable savings. Later she confessed to me, "I thought I could get away with it."

This summer I served over a month on a jury for a drug conspiracy trial. (I blogged about that here.) After we found all four defendants guilty, the judge came to talk to us and answer our questions. We learned that a large number of co-conspirators indicted along with these defendants had all pled guilty. The judge confirmed to us that these four had "rolled the dice," hoping to persuade a jury that they were unjustly charged. Why didn't these men plead guilty? They thought they could get away with it.

Thinking we can get away with it happens a lot, from speeding to not declaring everything on our tax returns to the U.S. government monitoring its citizens' phone conversations.

And this fantasy—this LIE—goes back a long way. All the way to the Garden of Eden, when the serpent scoffed at God's rule about not eating from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of

good and evil. “Surely you will not die!” (Gen. 3:4) In today’s language: “C’mon, you can get away with it!”

But, being sneaky, the enemy of our souls (and his minions who are the spirits who actually tempt us with lies) uses first person to make us think his thoughts are actually our own, so we are not aware of the source of our temptation: “I can get away with this.”

God has something to say about this lie. One of my favorite Bible verses, particularly when my sons were small, is Numbers 32:23: “Be sure your sin will find you out.”

There were three four-year-olds on our street including my son. One of them, a heartbreakingly sexually precocious little girl, said to Kevin one day, “Let’s go behind this bush next to my house, take off our clothes and kiss.” When he said no, she insisted, “It’s okay. Jordan (the other four-year-old) and I did it yesterday, and no one will know.” Kevin said, “But God will see us, and He’ll tell my mommy!”

Back to God’s opinion. Jesus said in Mark 4:22, “Everything that is hidden will eventually be brought into the open, and every secret will be brought to light.” In Luke 12:3, He said, “Whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms will be proclaimed fom the housetops.”

Paul wrote in Galatians 6:7, “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.”

No, we *can’t* get away with it. That’s a truth that can keep us out of a lot of trouble!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/think-you-can-get-away-with-it/

“Accepting Jesus as Your Savior Means You Won’t Have to Suffer Bad Karma Anymore?”

I have friends who believe that people will suffer bad karma from past lives and it will be carried over to this life. Now, I read in the Bible that if you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and ask him for forgiveness with a sincere heart, He will wipe away your imperfections and you won’t have to suffer “bad karma” anymore. Is this correct? If not, then what’s the point of asking for forgiveness? Isn’t this what Christ died on the cross for? I need the truth because it will set me free.

What Eastern religions call karma is the Bible’s principle that “a man reaps what he sows” (Galatians 6:7). God created a cause-and-effect universe where our choices have consequences.

In the Eastern systems, each person has to work off his own bad karma. . . over and over and over, through as many lifetimes as it takes. In contrast, the Bible offers the marvelous gift of forgiveness and grace (God’s blessing that we don’t deserve) through Jesus Christ. You are right that Jesus takes away the guilt of our sins and the eternal punishment of being separated from God forever. However, although forgiveness takes away the obstacle of sin that separates us from friendship with God, it does not take away the consequences of our choices. In the same way that a parent disciplines his child because he loves him, God allows us to suffer the consequences of our choices so that it builds character and helps us to grow and mature and become wise.

Christ died on the cross to reconcile us to God, but He does not take away the effects of our choices. For example, let's say I steal something from a store. Stealing is a sin, and I then confess it to God, who forgives me because Jesus paid for that sin on the Cross, but He will still let me experience the shame and humiliation of being arrested and having to go to trial and then jail. My relationship with God has been restored, but I still have to experience the consequences of my actions. In the process, He will develop my character and help me to grow from this painful experience, making me more mature and less selfish, preparing me for this life and my life in heaven. But once I die, it's all behind me, forgiven and never to be suffered again.

Does this make sense?

Sue Bohlin

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"Does Fornication Ruin Your Life Forever?"

I recently had a child outside of marriage. Upon being brought up inside the church with a family who have strong Christian beliefs, I found pregnancy to be the most unhappy time of my life, with family sicknesses making me more stressed.

I knew what to expect from my family, with feelings of disappointment all round, but they have grown to be supportive and love my daughter. Although they seem to have accepted the new lifestyle I will lead, I myself cannot come to terms with things.

I constantly go over my mistakes, wishing I could rewind time. I would have done so many things differently. I've been going out with my boyfriend for a long time but I feel we have made so many mistakes. I love my boyfriend to bits and couldn't lose him after nearly four years of going out and don't want to make things sound like he is a mistake. Even more so, when I say I wish this situation had never happened, I feel like I am saying that I wish my daughter wasn't here, which isn't true because I love her to bits too!

I can't rid the shame I feel and felt throughout pregnancy. I read so many magazines that talked about happy expectant mothers-to-be and how to enjoy pregnancy and the blooming process. I cannot say I felt the same way. Right now I hate everything I have done and feel I have let my family down. I feel all the respect I built up over the years has amounted to nothing.

Not only that but my personal dreams have been affected. By now, I always imagined I'd have a big house, be well into my career and be married with a good Christian man. Instead everything is the total opposite and I feel I no longer have a purpose to serve or way to enjoy life. I feel I've ruined everything. I'd never have thought I'd have ever been in this situation. I saw it happen to friends of mine also in church previously and had deep sympathy for them. But going through it yourself is 100 times worse.

I feel alone, hopeless, depressed, and unloved. My boyfriend wants us to get married, go back to church and get our lives back on track but I don't know how to because all I feel is constant pain and reminders of what I've done. After all, the baby has to be a reminder and I can't forget her. I feel like my mistakes will affect my life forever.

I also feel a slight anger in all of this with myself, my boyfriend and certain friends. I can't understand why I had to be made to be everyone's gossip and selected out of all the

girls in the world to be made an example of. I feel so hard done by, especially more so as I was trying ever so hard to change and that was when I was hit with the news. I still hear a couple of my friends talking of their fornication and can't help but feel angry that they are not being frowned upon by the church as people are none the wiser of their goings on, which I know is bad for me to feel, but I am full of all kinds of emotions right now.

When will the sun shine for me? I can't take much more of these cloudy days?!

Very unhappy.

You have touched my heart with your letter. I am so sorry for the pain you are going through, but I have *such* good news of comfort and HOPE for you! I have a dear friend in our church who was in your exact shoes. God is using Ellen so mightily now, and blessing her life so much, that when people make a list of who is most used by God in our church, she's right up near the top—and that is no exaggeration. I asked her to write a response to your letter, which follows my remarks.

One thing I want to share is that a mark of maturity is the ability to distinguish between a bad choice you have repented of, and the grace of God giving us good things even as a result of that bad choice—like your precious daughter and your boyfriend. You can say that you sinned, that you made a bad choice, and still embrace the goodness of God in giving you two wonderful people who love you, and they don't cancel out each other. That's what grace looks like: God continues to bless us even though we don't deserve it. He's such a good and loving God! He is inviting you to enjoy His blessings with a smile on His face—all you have to do is decide to "turn your cup right side up" to receive the joy of those blessings.

Also, I strongly encourage you to forgive yourself. That's really about embracing God's forgiveness, which He has already

given you if you have trusted Christ, but 1 John 1:9 says God not only forgives us, He *cleanses* us from all unrighteousness. Make a decision to “turn your cup right side up” to receive His cleansing, which will wash away the guilt and, in time, the shame you carry.

Enjoy the letter that follows from someone who is praying for you and absolutely understands you.

In His grip,

Sue Bohlin

> Dear friend,
>
> When I read your email today I could truly sense the sadness and hurt in your heart. I have prayed for you many times today already. I am deeply sorry for your heartache. But I have a message of hope for you: God loves you desperately and He is a God of second, third, and fourth chances. His arms are outstretched to you, just waiting for you to accept His love and forgiveness.
>
> I could understand your pain because my story is similar to yours. I, too, grew up in a strong Christian home. I trusted Jesus as my Savior when I was five years old. I remember that night clearly, my Mom and Dad had shared with me in God’s word that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). That included me. I was a sinner. But, God loved me so much that He provided a way for me to spend eternity in Heaven. He sent his only Son, Jesus, to be born of the virgin Mary, live a sinless life and then die on the cross for all the sins I had (and ever will) commit. Then He was raised from the dead on the third day! The Bible says in Ephesian 2:8-9, “For by grace are you saved through faith, it is a gift of God, not of man, so that no man can boast.” By placing my faith in Jesus alone, not counting on anything that I could do, I could spend eternity in Heaven. If you have never made the decision to trust Jesus as your

Savior, you can do that right now. It is not enough to know the information, you must receive it as your own.

I did that when I was young, but as I got older, I began to drift away from the Lord.

I, too, got pregnant outside of marriage. I, too, felt like it was unfair that all the other girls who I knew were sleeping with their boyfriends didn't get "caught." I felt the course of my life was altered forever. It wasn't the way I had planned my life. But, I can tell you, I know now that it was a situation that God allowed for my life so that He could be glorified.

I say that because what I came to understand was that I was living my life according to how I thought it should go and doing whatever I wanted. I know now that getting pregnant was God's way of shaking me by the shoulders and saying, "OK, you did it your way, but I have a better plan for your life. Follow Me now." I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that my precious daughter was a gift from God, not a punishment, to gently push my life back on track. All children are special, but I feel that she saved me from even more potential bad choices had I not become a mother when I did.

I now want to fast forward my life for you eight years. I did marry my boyfriend and we will celebrate our 8th wedding anniversary next month. Our daughter is 7 1/2, and our son is 2 1/2. We are very involved in our church where we serve in the High School ministry. I have shared my testimony several times with many girls. My story, by the grace of God, has been beneficial to many people. I have girls who ask me to keep them accountable for their behavior with their boyfriends. They ask me advice, and God speaks to them through me. Not everyone knows my story, not everyone remembers how my husband and I started out, but, for some, it is a blessing. Maybe God allowed this in my life so I could share my story with you. Maybe there is another girl

who you will be able to bless with your story some day.

Satan is the father of all lies and would have loved for me to think that I messed up, so why bother with church, God, or anything like that. He wants you to believe that as well. All your negative thoughts about yourself and situation come from Satan, not God.

God, on the other hand, is the Father in Heaven who loves you so much and wants to pour out blessings on you. Choose to accept His love. Choose to live in His forgiveness. He wants the absolute best for your life. His plan for your life is perfect. While it is hard to understand why He allowed this in your life, focus your attention on Him. Get to know Him. Listen to praise music and praise God. Allow Him to fill you up. Let God fill the void in your heart. After all, He is the only one who can. Although my husband is a wonderful, fun, sweet, caring man who loves the Lord, if I look to my husband to fulfill all of my needs I will be disappointed. Only God can fulfill my deepest needs and desires. He made us that way.

My story did not turn out great because I married the father of my baby, my story turned out great because I let God lead me and love me. Not all girls in our situations end up marrying their boyfriends, and they can still have a wonderful life and relationship with God.

Some women who have had sex outside of marriage end up with so much guilt that they can’t enjoy a sexual relationship when they do get married. That is not what God intends. Sex is a gift to married couples, and God meant for it to be enjoyed, guilt-free. Pray that when you do marry, you will let God take away your guilty feelings so that you can enjoy an intimate relationship with your husband as God intended. I would encourage you to abstain from sex until you do marry. You can start over.

I would also encourage you to go back to church. Hold your head up high when you walk in the door. God loves you. The creator of the universe cherishes you! He is proud to be your Heavenly Father.

While changing your thinking will not be easy, it can be done. Trust God, pray that you can believe the wonderful things about yourself that He thinks about you. Pray with your boyfriend. Thank God for your precious daughter. Thank God that he shook your shoulders, too! This can be a turning point in your life. Choose to let yourself be loved by God and His people.

I will continue to pray for you, your boyfriend, and your daughter. May the Lord bless you abundantly. If you would like to correspond further, I would be happy to.

By His Grace Alone,

Ellen