

God the Parent

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Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 5:1-2, NIV

Introduction

For many years, I didn't think that the Bible said much about how to raise children. I began to realize that the Scriptures offered more when I was introduced to several child-training programs that claimed to be Bible-based. By then, I was a dry sponge in need of help, so I relished any insight I could get. These teachers gave me hope that the Bible provided answers, but over time I realized that their instructions were lacking deep biblical content and, at times, contradicted the Bible. I began to believe that there was need for a more thorough search of the Scriptures. This book is the result of my endeavor to do that.

The Bible verses that address parenting directly are helpful for moms and dads, but there are several other ways to learn about parenting from God's Word. There are parents and children in the Bible, and lessons can be learned from their experiences, too. The fact that God acted as a father to the nation of Israel during the Exodus and the wanderings in the desert leaves us with an example that will be pursued in depth in this book. Of course, God is a father to all who are born again, providing us with more examples. On a few occasions, those who wrote the letters to the early believers (which now make up most of the New Testament) said that their care, concerns and actions were similar to a parent with his child, leaving us with more upon which

to meditate. I wish that I could have considered all facets of every phrase, passage or historical record on parenting in the Bible. The fact is God's wisdom for parents runs so deep that it offers a lifetime supply of encouragement and direction.

Your Resident Expert

By some people's standards, I don't have the technical qualifications to be an expert on children. I am not a psychiatrist or psychologist. I am not a child development specialist. This might be a problem if I were writing in order to defend a particular behavioral hypothesis, but I am not. Instead, I am writing as a student of the Bible, believing that God gave us an instruction manual that tells us how to live our lives. I am starting with the premise that whatever God said works.

For our family, following God's teaching and example as best we can has helped. We have a great time, we love one another, and our children are great friends. Very often, when we pack our crew and go out for an event, people offer compliments such as, "What sweet children you have," and "They are so well behaved." Or, from acquaintances we have heard, "You have the best kids," or "I'd rather watch six of your children than two of somebody else's." As much as we appreciate the kind words, we know that we don't always feel like the perfect family at home. Why not? We are acutely aware of the struggles that each child brings to us. We can count our shortcomings as parents as well. This does not feel like utopia. What we do have is all by God's grace and instruction. Therefore, I can say with great confidence that your resident expert is not me. God is your resident expert.

On a similar note, I do not use anecdotes from my own family to validate the advice in this book. I don't tell stories about our family and then suggest the reader trust us or follow us. The only thing that makes the advice in this book reliable is that it comes from God's Word. He invented the family and showed us how to love its members, and for that I am grateful.

Audience

Primarily, I am writing for those Christian parents who would benefit by reading in hours what would take months to study. If this is you, please know that you are on my heart, and my desire is to help you. I have also realized that some who are not parents might benefit from this book. It has a lot to say to any believer about the way God cares for those who call him Father. The book can also help newlyweds or those working toward marriage to be both sober-minded and hopeful about family. Finally, I hope *God the Parent* will serve as a valuable resource

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for my own children and yours as they seek to raise their children in the future. My hope is to bless generations yet to come.

When writing, I decided to read each chapter to my family. To my surprise, they liked them and thanked me. Consider whether you might want to read *God the Parent* to your children, too.

Items of Clarification

I need to mention that I prefer not to use certain religious words that have come into English by transliteration from Greek or Latin. For example, in place of the word “church,” I prefer a term like “meeting,” “fellowship,” “group of believers” or “worship.” Instead of “baptism,” I would say “immerse.” In a Bible verse, I simply put brackets around the words I have replaced. By doing this, I hope to communicate the original intention of the passage more clearly.

In this book, I typically quote the New King James Version (NKJV) or the New International Version (NIV). Although I seldom cite the King James Version (KJV), a person can use it with tools like Strong’s numbering system to study the meaning of Greek and Hebrew words. For example, with Strong’s, one can see how a word found in a particular verse was used elsewhere in the Bible. The website www.blueletterbible.org

offers free access to the KJV, Strong’s and other linguistic tools.

I may quote only part of the verse referenced (sometimes just a few words). The short reference is meant to guide the reader to a concept embodied in the passage. Consider what lies before and after the part I cite in order to better understand the events taking place or instructions given.

Chapter 1

Good Parenting Is Important

How one parents matters. If you willingly pick up a book like this to read, you probably already believe parenting is important. Still, I want to devote this first chapter to laying out the case from a biblical standpoint, not only because I think people should approach this topic seriously, but because God makes that case and it is right to think about what he said. The fact is that life is full of concerns, and parenting must take priority. We should know how and why good parenting matters so much to God to help us stay focused from day to day. The Bible gives us good reason to be particular in the way we parent.

In the beginning, in Genesis 1 and 2, God's relationship with his two greatest earthly creations was quite wonderful and simple. He was with them (Genesis 3:8). Had Adam and Eve's children been born in the garden, they, too, would have walked with God; but that is not the way it worked out. Sin entered the world, and things got complicated. In due time, God would solve the sin problem. He would do something drastic, something passionate, and the concept of family would be central to those events.

In Genesis 22, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. At first glance, this situation seems far from the ideals of family, that members are to care for one another and protect each other. One can imagine the tension between obedience, sorrow and faith as this loving father struggled with such an unthinkable command. In the end, God provided a ram to take Isaac's place, showing that he would ultimately

provide the penalty for sin.¹ This is why the events matter so much: in Genesis 22, God used the relationships made through family to show, from his viewpoint, the cost of our salvation. God would suffer as a family suffers loss, yet he would be willing to endure it for the benefit of adding to his family a multitude of redeemed children.

The Genesis of Parenting

Since family is such an important institution for understanding the passion of Christ, one might expect to find great examples of families in the first book of the Bible. Quite to the contrary, we find families bitten by the sting of the evil human heart. In fact, in Genesis, families were problematic.

The first relationship between brothers ended with one violently murdering the other. Cain burned with jealousy over Abel's righteous sacrifice, so he killed him (Genesis 4).

We don't know much about what happened in the next 1,600 years or so, but we know it got very bad: mankind became exceedingly wicked. This was not a small group of troublemakers. The earth's population could easily have been hundreds of millions (1.11% annual growth) or billions (1.26% annual growth).² Eventually, the circumstances became so dire that God decided to start over with Noah and his family by destroying the earth in a giant and prolonged deluge (Genesis 6 and 7). If we think parent and child behavior is often bad now, we should consider that it was very likely worse back then (Genesis 6:5, 11-13).

Through Noah, humanity was saved by the preservation of one family through the faith of the father, yet not all was well

¹ Isaac was not a little child but was strong and probably capable of overpowering his elderly father (Genesis 22:6). Isaac, like Jesus, seemed to be willing.

² . Annual Growth Rate = (Population Final, 100 million or 1 billion/Population Initial, 2)

(1/Years, 1,600) - 1

in Noah's family (Hebrews 11:7). After the Flood, Noah got drunk and ended up cursing his own grandson. In Genesis 9, Ham "saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside" (Genesis 9:22, NIV). When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what Ham had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers [or relatives]" (Genesis 9:25, NIV).

Based only on what is provided in the text, I must conclude that the real tragedy of Genesis 9 lies in Noah's treatment of his own family.

First, his curse was not directed at Ham, who found Noah naked. It was directed at Ham's son, Canaan, but that was not logical or just. What did Canaan do wrong? He wasn't even mentioned as part of the events. Using him was just Noah's way to get at Ham. Yet we know that this way is not the way of God. Ezekiel 18:20 states that "The son shall not bear the guilt of the father." (NKJV, see also Deuteronomy 24:16). Second, we should wonder why in the world Noah would curse his own family. Had Ham done anything wrong, Noah could have talked with him and urged him to repent, but Noah chose to curse, which instituted strife between his children's families for generations to come. This event should be noted as one of several in Genesis that show that sin corrupts the family.

What can we learn here? Noah and his family had the unique opportunity to start over after the Flood. In a similar way, certain occasions renew the souls of family members and give hope for a new direction. These are times for blessing, not cursing. Parents shouldn't waste these opportunities. They must be careful not to blurt out a curse in anger or call their children or grandchildren anything curse-like. Children may do something foolish, but a parent or grandparent shouldn't speak into existence their stupidity. Instead, they should bless them and correct their foolish behavior.

Not too many generations after the Flood, God found a man who would trust him: Abraham. However, while Abraham and Sarah showed unique faith, both did some things that might make one scratch one's head in wonder (Genesis 15:6, Hebrews 11:8-11). Their lives included some self-induced family heartaches. How would these go over in your family life? Abraham let another man court his wife on two occasions because he was afraid he would get hurt if it were known that she was his wife. With this, he nearly lost her (Genesis 12:11-20, 20:2-18). Abraham also had a child with his servant, which was not what God had in mind at all (Genesis 16:4). Taking a servant as a concubine was Sarah's idea, but Sarah quickly became jealous of and cruel toward Hagar (Genesis 16:4-5, 21:9-10). Is this the kind of family one would want to emulate?

Genesis also records several significant events in Lot's family's life. Lot, who was Abraham's nephew, offered his daughters to a rowdy mob of men, saying, "...do to them as you wish" (Genesis 19:8, NKJV). Lot's wife disobeyed God and died because she looked back at Sodom, presumably still longing for what it had offered (Genesis 13:10-13, 19:26). After they escaped the city, Lot's daughters got Lot drunk and then slept with him (Genesis 19:30-36). The daughters then became pregnant and bore sons whose descendants became two nations, the Ammonites and Moabites, which contended with Moses and the Israelites centuries later (Genesis 19:37-38). Lot's family provides more evidence that the Genesis records are not always a good source of examples of good family decisions.

Later, Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac, and daughter-in-law, Rebekah, also did some things that were not worthy to be esteemed. Like his father, Isaac was willing to give his wife away out of fear (Genesis 26:7-11). Much of the family troubles concerning Isaac's immediate and extended family, however, had to do with jealousy, selfishness, greed and

revenge. In their family, Isaac and Rebekah had favorites. Rebekah loved their son Jacob, and Isaac loved their son Esau. This was a what-can-you-do-for-me kind of love, each picking the child who satisfied some daily want. Esau provided wild game, and Jacob provided companionship (Genesis 25:27-28).

Then came a time when Rebekah and Jacob teamed up to lie to Isaac in order to get Esau's blessing.

So Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, "The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob."

Genesis

27:41, NKJV Once again in Genesis, one brother was willing to murder another. However, Jacob fled to live with Laban, Esau and Jacob's uncle, and did not come back until after his mother had died. (The days of mourning Isaac's death were not at hand as Esau had suspected; Isaac in fact lived many more years. (Genesis 35:27-29).)

Jacob had problems with Laban. Laban cheated Jacob out of the seven years he had worked in order to marry Rachel, giving him Leah as a wife instead. Jacob later also married Rachel, but Leah was constantly seeking her husband's approval, and Rachel was jealous (Genesis 30:1, 8, 20). She was barren, but Leah had children (Genesis 29:30-35, 31:7). In desperation, Rachel asked her husband to sleep with her servant (Genesis 30:5-8). The name of one of the sons from those relations, Naphtali, expressed Rachel's feelings; "With great wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and indeed I have prevailed." (Genesis 30:8, NKJV). The child's name spoke of the discord between the sisters; they were determined opponents.

Esau's marital woes were not as well documented. He had married two Hittite wives who caused Isaac and Rebekah much distress. Eventually, Esau added a third wife, a

descendant of Ishmael, in order to make his mother and father happy (Genesis 26:34-35, 27:46, 28:8-9).

When it was time for Jacob to return to the Promised Land, Rachel and Leah spoke pointed words about their father, Laban: “Are we not considered strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money.” (Genesis 31:15, NKJV). So, Rachel stole her father’s idols and lied about it (Genesis 31:19, 34-35). Why would Rachel want an idol? Because the family was worshipping idols (Genesis 35:2).

How did Jacob’s children fare? Consider what some of them did. Reuben defiled his father’s bed (Genesis 35:22, 49:4). Simeon and Levi lied and murdered (Genesis 34:13, 26-31, 49:5-6). The brothers, minus Benjamin and Reuben, agreed to kill Joseph and, when they had second thoughts, sold him as a slave (Genesis 37). Judah hired a prostitute who turned out to be his widowed daughter-in-law (Genesis 38:1-26).

In Genesis 49, we find out from Jacob what would happen to each of his sons: “Gather around so I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come” (v. 1, NIV). Much of what was said would not be considered complimentary or optimistic.

Repeatedly in Genesis, we see a family in conflict, ensnared by sinful decisions. The book of Genesis does not offer examples of great families. Viewing it in isolation, a person might wonder if parenting matters much. We have the rest of the Bible to show us how to steer clear of the family problems found here. Of course, showing what happens naturally to families is a convincing argument for the importance of doing it differently, and Genesis does serve to communicate clearly the need for something better. It shows that people don’t have what it takes to parent well on their own, so they need new insights from God. Without committing to receiving his wisdom on the matter, a family could turn into quite a mess.

Children do not get to pick their families, and if there are bad circumstances, one can’t simply leave. If there is cruelty,

jealousy or annoyance, it likely goes on year after year. It is hard to be in a family when all is not going well. On the other hand, it does not have to go badly. One family can foster adversity, and another can foster honor and respect.

Children's children *are* the crown of old men, And the glory of children *is* their father.

Proverbs 17:6, NKJV

Here, we have a picture of how a child might look up to his father and how a grandfather might treasure his grandchildren. God wants family members to enjoy and love one another, and parenting plays a significant role in the process.

The Importance of Parenting Throughout Proverbs

Proverbs' emphasis on parenting suggests its importance. Much of the wisdom in Proverbs specifically coaches parents.³ Also, the book regularly addresses the writer's child.⁴ For example, it says, "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They are a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck." (Proverbs 1:8-9, NKJV). Most of the rest of the book is meant to teach wisdom to the children of the king. It is a father's bequest of wisdom to his children. It is a father taking his role as parent seriously.

If you are wondering how imperative good parenting is, consider what Proverbs has to say about it.

Chasten your son while there is hope, And do not set your heart on his destruction.

³ . Proverbs 10:1, 5; 13:1, 24; 15:20; 17:6, 21, 25; 19:13, 18, 26-27; 20:11, 20; 22:6, 15; 23:13, 22, 24-25; 28:7, 24; 29:3, 15, 17; 30:11, 17

⁴ . Proverbs 1:10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:1, 10, 20; 5:1, 7, 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1, 24; 8:32; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13, 21; 27:11; 31:1-2

Proverbs 19:18, NKJV

Parents who choose to leave a child to his own devices could be accessories in his early death. For those who exert discipline, there is hope. Parenting can provide a child with a bright future, or it can result in his destruction. It is that significant.

Even the person who was the example of living a rebellious life in Proverbs 5:11-14 knew that good parenting offered him hope (NKJV).

And you mourn at last, When your flesh and your body
are consumed, And say: "How I have hated instruction,
And my heart despised correction! I have not obeyed
the voice of my teachers, Nor inclined my ear to those
who instructed me! I was on the verge of total ruin, In
the midst of the assembly and congregation."

In the passage, the person whose flesh and body were spent received correction when he was a child. Good guidance allowed the rebellious adult to realize the mistakes he had made, even after years of rebellion.

In Proverbs, the consequences of either listening to or rejecting a parent's discipline and teaching are clarified.

A fool despises his father's instruction, But he who
receives correction is prudent.

Proverbs 15:5, NKJV

He who disdains instruction despises his own soul, But
he who heeds rebuke gets understanding.

Proverbs 15:32, NKJV

Proverbs is packed with these kinds of comparisons. One's decisions make one either a fool who despises himself or a prudent person with understanding. By providing discipline,

parents give children a chance to respond well to it and to gain life and honor (Proverbs 10:17, 13:18). When parents provide a moral code and show children when they are wrong, it can save them from more ruinous behavior in the future (Proverbs 6:20-24). These rules provide a better life. Similarly, Ephesians 6:1-3 promises a fruitful and long life for obeying the instructions of parents (NKJV, see also Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16). Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. *“Honor your father and mother,”* which is the first commandment with promise: *“that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”*

Good parents provide children with the guidance necessary for a good life and the blessing of God.

Another reason why parenting must secure a high priority is because “He who begets a scoffer *does so* to his sorrow, And the father of a fool has no joy.” (Proverbs 17:21, NKJV). And, “A foolish son *is* a grief to his father, And bitterness to her who bore him.” (Proverbs 17:25, NKJV, see also Proverbs 10:1, 30:17).

Children who do not learn restraint end up in a mess. The world may love them, but by God’s standards their actions will finish in disgrace. They will be torn apart by the temptations of the devil, who “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8, NIV). Parents who do not provide discipline are greatly increasing the likelihood that a child will fail, act stupidly, be poor, be shameful, die prematurely and deny what is right (Proverbs 10:17, 12:1, 13:18, 15:10). Wisdom says that parents should earnestly provide biblical instruction and discipline. God’s plan for raising children is not to leave them alone and hope they grow out of it. Parents need to get serious about their jobs. Proverbs’ warnings make the risks clear, and the spread between potential outcomes described by the writer serves to intensify the message of the importance of parenting well.

The book of Proverbs promotes the fostering of a self-disciplined life by combining teaching (e.g., 4:1), warning (e.g., 4:14-15), correction involving loss or discomfort (e.g., 3:11, 5:12, 23:14), and wisdom (e.g., 4:5-6). To refer to the concept of discipline from a biblical perspective, one must think of all of these ideas at the same time. Discipline can't be just one or two of them.

We tend to use the English word *discipline* to speak only of a parent-designed consequence involving loss or discomfort, but we do use forms of the word that communicate the interconnected concepts presented in Proverbs. The aim of leading, teaching and instructing (discipleship) and correction involving loss or discomfort (discipline) is a life of self-control (self-discipline) and dedicated focus (a discipline). Proverbs says that the route to a self-disciplined life in which one practices the ways of God as a discipline is through discipleship and appropriate discipline.

This holistic concept of discipline is what Proverbs considers important.

Punishment of a Rebellious Son

Good parenting matters! The Old Testament Law bears it out.

Could you have handled the pressure of being a parent in Israel?

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and *who*, when they have chastened him, will not heed them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city. And they shall say to the elders of his city, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death with

stones; so you shall put away the evil from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear.

Deuteronomy 21:18-21, NKJV (see also Exodus 21:15, 17; Leviticus 20:9; Deuteronomy 27:16 and Proverbs 30:17) What if a parent's laissez-faire style reared a sinful young adult? A parent would have had to hand him over to be killed by stoning.

If you were living in Old Testament times and if you had any affection for your children, you would have been desperate to raise them properly. Can you feel the weight of responsibility that parents under this law would have felt? There was significant pressure not to fail.

Things haven't changed, really. There is still significant pressure not to fail because children will face eternal judgment for what is done during this life (Romans 2:6-8). Parents, this matters.

Eli and Sons

One can learn something by watching another family. Consider God's displeasure with the priest Eli and his sons, who were also priests.

Now Eli was very old; and he heard everything his sons did to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.

1 Samuel 2:22, NKJV Eli's sons were sleeping with women who were not their wives and participating in other deplorable behavior. After hearing the news, Eli presented an ineffectual rebuke (1 Samuel 2:23-25), and God responded to his family with judgment.

So the messenger answered and said [to Eli], "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has been a great slaughter among the people. Also your two sons,

Hophni and Phinehas, are dead; and the ark of God has been captured.” Then it happened, when he made mention of the ark of God, that Eli fell off the seat backward by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.

1 Samuel 4:17-18, NKJV Eli’s sons’ behavior provoked a just response. The judgment was not only for Eli’s sons, but also for Eli (1 Samuel 3:14 and 4:18). This was the reason for the verdict against Eli: “his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them.” (1 Samuel 3:13, NKJV). Unfortunately, these men missed the message of self-control, and perhaps Eli had an air of carelessness about parenting over the course of his life.

The deaths of Eli and his sons were meant to be an example to anyone who heard what happened, and they should be an example to us (1 Samuel 3:11). Eli did hear from God. In the end, however, he was judged by how he handled his children.

This account of Eli’s life doesn’t mean that every father is responsible for his grown children’s sinful actions; however, Eli’s predicament gives those who do not plan to teach self-restraint reason for concern. We should consider 1 Samuel 2-4 when we are trying to understand how God feels about the role of parents. Stated simply, God expects parents to teach their children to control their behavior.

Manage His Own Family

First Timothy 3:4-5 speaks of requirements for servant-overseers in the fellowship of believers. This person “must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s [fellowship of followers]?)” (NIV).

Christians who can act as older, guiding brothers to others need to prove that they are effective in their own home because effective parenting is a sampling of a Christian man's capability.

If a person is trying to decide what great things he might do for our Lord, he should look to his own family first. In the order of responsibilities, parenting takes priority. Staying away from serving roles to focus on family shows that a person loves his family, other believers and God.

What should one do if he is serving in the fellowship and has a rebellious teenage son or daughter? Should he carry on in his role? Should he wish things were different but decide this is the way it is with teenagers? No. He should leave his role for as long as it takes (weeks, months, or years) and get things in order at home because good parenting is that important.

Set Apart for God's Purpose

People often use the term *holy* to mean perfect, but its meaning is broader than that. To be holy is to be set apart. Perfection is one way God is set apart from humans, so he, indeed, is holy in that unique respect. On the other hand, most things that were considered set apart in the Old Testament were not too different than the common versions—bowls, lamp stands, animals for sacrifice, etc. The difference was that God said they were holy, and at that point, they were. For Jesus-followers, this understanding is significant because the Bible says our children are not common, but are holy (1 Corinthians 7:14).

Holy items were to be treated with great concern. Those who thought anyone could burn incense before God all died the day they tried it because they did not treat the activity with proper, holy respect (Numbers 16). Also, Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, might have thought God would appreciate

their plan when they offered unauthorized sacrifices on the altar; however, fire consumed them (Leviticus 10:1-3). The record makes it clear that God really did want holy activities to be done in a certain way.

If the Spirit of God were present in the Tent of Meeting, how would you have handled priestly duties? Would you have been flippant or careless? Or, would you have been thoughtful, patient and deliberate? Would you have gone through all the necessary preparations? Since children are holy, a parent's attitude should be one of carefulness, similar to what was required of priests. This is no ordinary calling, making the children of believers no ordinary children. Therefore, parents should care for them with dignity, teach them carefully and treat life with them as a serious matter.

Defining how to handle children who are set apart for God is the goal of this book. How do we prepare? What should our attitude be? What do we do? What do we teach? Raising children well is not a matter of good intentions but a matter of doing what God wants, the way he wants it. We must be very deliberate to find out exactly what pleases the Lord, committing ourselves to the Holy Spirit and his Word. It is about following him as closely as possible, and it precludes many activities as well. For example, degrading children contradicts the notion that they are holy. We should not conclude that God is concerned about some details, but not all.

We should not conclude that God is more interested in our creativity and happiness than in his holy representation. We should not add God to only one compartment of our lives but should honor him with every moment, every decision and every action.

Vitally Important

The record of the families of Genesis reveals the great need for help. From Proverbs, we learn that parents put their children in danger when they neglect to provide discipline. Also, through discipline, children receive some of God's most wonderful blessings. The Old Testament Law showed the urgency of good parenting because it required that rebellious young adults be put to death for their rebellion. We see how God dealt with Eli when he neglected to restrain his sons. From the New Testament, we learn that a person who wants to be a servant-overseer must first prove himself a good leader of his family and that our children are to be handled as holy treasures. God is clear: good parenting is important! Now, we must decide whether we are going to take him seriously or not.

This survey of passages that express the importance of good parenting is brief, especially when we consider that God chose to relate to his redeemed creation as a father. Every event recorded speaks to the importance of this relationship. One should not underestimate the extent to which God has encouraged parents to deem their job important.

Parents, devote yourselves to God, his life in you and the Scriptures. Find some counselors who make children a priority. You can read books that teach about parenting, but you should always compare the advice that authors give to the teachings of the Bible. Take any good ideas and leave behind bad philosophies. God calls parents to a great ambition with their families, and they should commit to the task wholeheartedly.

For Discussion

1. To you, how important is good parenting? Has this changed over time?
2. What distracts you from parenting well?

3. If you were to convince a friend to put more focus on parenting, what would you say?
4. Which section of this chapter motivates you most? Why?
5. Think of an individual or couple who has parented well. Why did you choose that person or couple? How would you describe their style of parenting?

Chapter 2

Goals

“For I [God] have known him [Abraham], in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.”

Genesis 18:19, NKJV

What are your top ten goals for your children? This is a valuable question, one worth thinking and talking about. The following chapter is a collection of some of the Bible’s lessons on what a child, or any person for that matter, should be when he becomes mature.

The Bible does not lay out the kind of strategy that would lead only to raising well-adjusted and independent children, nor does it suggest that socially acceptable behavior or self-determination should be a parent’s aim. God expects much more. Parents are to concern themselves with the pull of sin and the pull of God in a child’s heart and to encourage their children to practice extra-ordinary obedience to their Maker.

Godly Character

God is good. Parents should want their children to be like him, displaying all his good attributes. We learn about his character by studying his ways. For example, we can think about the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) or consider the ways of genuine love (1 Corinthians 13). Several books, guides and articles have been written to expound godly characteristics and to help children understand how these can be put into everyday practice. Parents should want their children to embrace these concepts, which need to be explained carefully with examples. What is kindness? What is courage? What is gentleness?

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

Philippians 4:8, NKJV

These “things” are worth thinking through with children.

Dependent

In order to have the fruit of the Spirit, children must believe they died with Christ and that they now live by God’s Spirit. The aim is not to have children who follow a set of rules, have learned about Christianity and appear to comply. The goal of parents should be to raise children who know, trust, love and submit to the Spirit of the Living God. Studying character is valuable and important, but parents must also teach that a person can’t produce in himself Christian character. The only way to see good fruit is to cling to Jesus.

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:4-5, NIV

Children can do nothing truly good without Jesus. So, parents should wish for their children to produce the fruit of the Spirit, and they should wish for their children to hear from Jesus and abide in his power during each day. These two are inseparable. The fruit represents the goal and dependence on Jesus is the means to attain it.

God’s aim is that we would fellowship with the Holy Spirit in such a way that we do what he wants. Children are no different. Teaching them to think of themselves as fully dependent on God is a truth that enables that life.

Bound

Is God opposed to defining his own as slaves? Not at all.

For to me the people of Isra'el are slaves; they are my slaves whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; I am ADONAI your God.

Leviticus 25:55, Complete Jewish Bible

For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves.

1 Peter 2:15-16, NIV, see also 1 Corinthians 7:22

A positive or negative notion of the concept of slavery is completely dependent on the master. The experience could be horrible because people can be horrible. On the other hand, what if the master was perfect, full of love, brilliant, powerful and unchanging? Slavery could be fantastic. One who committed himself to another could receive protection, provision and meaningful work. He could instantly experience a higher standard of living and enjoy many of the perks of his master's social status.

Everyone is bound to something. The Bible says that one is either a slave to sin (the horrible master) or a slave to God. God's free gift of eternal life is the opportunity to become a slave to a good and loving master, to be bound to him.

But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin *is* death, but the gift of God *is* eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6:22-23, NKJV, see also verses 16-21 and 1 Corinthians 6:20

Parents should want their children to be totally submissive to God as loving, willing slaves. Parents should ask their children, "If you were to consider Jesus as your master in this situation, what decision would you make?"

The Bible says that Jesus-followers are to consider themselves to be both slaves and God's adopted children (Ephesians 1:5). This is not a contradiction. With a perfect God, living as a slave and living as a son are equally desirable roles. Again, it is all about the quality of the master.

Love, Honor and Friendship

Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commands.” (John 14:15, NIV). True love will prove itself: “But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him” (1 John 2:5, NIV). “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:18, NIV). Love is a word of action.

Similarly, children demonstrate love toward parents by jumping to obey. Parents can say to their children, “The best way for you to show mom and dad that you love them is to do what we ask you right away, okay?” This truth about loving each other with action needs to loom large in parents’ hearts because the meaty part of life is more about love and relationships than it is about rules and performance. Rules, it turns out, are a vehicle for love. Parents should be consistently proposing that children love God and others with action.

Love differs from honor, but obedience will communicate them both.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother...”

Ephesians 6:1-2, NIV

Honor entails thoughtful reflection on the person to whom the honor is given, whereas love is born in the heart. Children should want to obey family rules and goals (which should be aligned with God’s goals) out of love and respect, engaging their minds and hearts in this endeavor.

Jesus spoke about loving by keeping his father’s commandments, which led to speaking about friendship, too:

If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and *that* your joy may be full. This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer

do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.

John 15:10-15, NKJV

Think about this statement in light of all the events recorded in the Bible. One simple, life-changing truth is revealed, refreshing those who would fear and follow God: Jesus loves by laying down his life and proclaims, “I have called you friends.”

If Jesus calls us friends, we must be friends with the Father as well. Father, son and adopted children are friends. If he had in his mind to call us friends, wouldn’t he want us to love our children as friends, too? Parents should enjoy their children’s camaraderie every day. Anything less seems cold. For me, under five-year-olds make great buddies for investigating a construction project in the neighborhood. Six- to ten-year-olds provide companionship for outdoor games. Pre-teens and teens make grocery shopping and work projects more enjoyable. I love to be with my children. Furthermore, I look forward to seeing how these friendships will develop as life unfolds from one season to the next. The goal is friendship now and continued friendship as our children grow older.

Friendship with a child, as John 15 says, ideally includes obedience to Jesus and producing fruit for the Father. It includes knowing God’s will and making sacrifices for brothers and sisters. The best friendships will be founded on these ambitions.

As parents and children abide in God’s love, special relationships can be formed. We have a glimpse into this type of friendship thanks to the words Paul wrote about Timothy.

For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every [group of believers].

1 Corinthians 4:17, NIV

Although they were not blood relatives, Paul had a father-son relationship with Timothy, loving him as a co-worker, friend and son. Paul expressed how he felt about the one he referred to as a “son” in this letter:

I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did, as without ceasing I remember you [Timothy] in my prayers night and day, greatly desiring to see you, being mindful of your tears, that I may be filled with joy, when I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also.

2 Timothy 1:3-5, NIV

Parents can think of this kind of relationship between Paul and Timothy as a long-term goal with their own children, hoping for a sincere, genuine, glorious relationship focused on the friendship that Jesus introduces in John 15:10-15—friendship with their Maker.

Some parents believe that they can't be friends with their children until their children become adults. I bought into this philosophy at one time, committing to being the "bad guy" until my children were old enough to be friends. Please consider this very important truth regarding my mistake here: Jesus said that he called his followers friends and he said, by the Holy Spirit, that those he loved he disciplined as children (John 15:15, Hebrews 12:5-6). God disciplines his children-friends. Similarly, parents can and should discipline well and, at the same time, love their children as friends.

If parents don't have a feeling of friendship and thoughts of respect and adoration for their children now, then they have not met the friendship goal and need to ask God for a solution to this problem. The commitment to friendship is a good foundation for teaching that love and honor, whether for friends, parents, children or God, are best shown with action.

Self-Control

Many moms and dads, whether followers of Jesus or not, would hope for their children to be loving, joyful, patient, kind and good; but the concept of self-control competes with the you-only-live-once worldview. The idea of self-control can scare those who aren't believers because it gets to the heart of the cost of commitment to Jesus. On the

other hand, when someone accepts salvation, he can begin to plan for eternity rather than getting temporary pleasure.

In Paul's day, the issue of self-control, eternity and righteousness was a turn-off to Felix, the unrepentant governor. When Paul brought up the subjects, Felix pulled back and said, "That's enough for now!" (Acts 24:25, NIV).

Self-control matters greatly to God. Consider the growth of a believer.

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, *you* will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1:5-8, NKJV

Believers must add self-control to their faith, among other things.

This is how one is fruitful for Jesus.

The person without self-control is at risk.

Whoever *has* no rule over his own spirit *is like* a city broken down, without walls.

Proverbs 25:28, NKJV

Walls were a city's most reliable defense. Without them, enemies had an easier time attacking. Self-control is a child's wall. Parents should not send children into a hostile, tempting, devil-led world without it, but should raise them in such a way that they will accept discipline and instruction, leading to a life of restraint.

Take note that without self-control, every other good character trait produced by the Spirit is impossible. For example, children cannot be loving or gentle unless they can control their own selfish desires. Similarly, if one possesses self-control, it is helpful any day of the week, at any age and under any tempting situation. This means that lessons learned in childhood can translate to good choices when a person is an adult. Parents might think of it like this: teaching a child to come when he is called requires the same self-control as learning not to steal.

Teaching a child not to yell at her brother requires the type of self-control that may save her marriage. On the other hand, when a child does not learn restraint, it may haunt him for years to come, and he may blame God for the condition of his life: “A man’s own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the LORD.” (Proverbs 19:3, NIV).

Although the Bible does not mention strength of will on every page, it implies its necessity from beginning to end. If parents teach their children to be self-controlled, they may not get a lot of support from unbelievers, who might prefer to raise children to be self-determined, that is, able to decide on and get what they want. However, to believers it should be obvious that, if God wants us to raise children who live a moral lifestyle, they will need the will and ability to do so.

Self-Evaluation

Self-control goes one step further when children grow up to become their own disciplinarians, evaluating their actions on their own and correcting what needs to be corrected. They will look to God and others to catch what they miss. This, too, is part of God’s goal for children. The great lament urges self-searching.

Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD.

Lamentations 3:40, NIV

The necessity of self-evaluation was passed on to believers in the first century, too.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.

2 Corinthians 13:5, NIV

Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else.

Galatians 6:4, NIV

But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ...For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.

1 Corinthians 11:28, 31-32, NIV

Self-evaluation pleases our Lord, as does asking for God's help in the evaluation. In the Old Testament, one of the great God pleasers, David, poured out his heart.

Test me, Lord, and try me, examine my heart and my mind; for I have always been mindful of your unfailing love and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness.

Psalms 26:2-3, NIV

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

Psalms 139:23, NIV

How wonderful it would be to have children who would one day cry out like David.

Self-evaluation can't function fully apart from a committed human will and the presence of the Holy Spirit. For example, in the context of the statement, "Each one should test his own actions," it says, "For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life." (Galatians 6:8, NKJV). The Spirit of Jesus will lead his followers to the self-evaluative life. Parents need to raise children who see the value of correction and seek after it later in life.

Welcoming Correction

Parents and children should welcome advice and correction. A fool despises his father's instruction, But he who receives correction is prudent.

Proverbs 15:5,

NKJV *It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools.*

Ecclesiastes 7:5, NKJV

Families should foster an environment in which those willing to rebuke are thanked and honored. Consider how David thought of rebukes received.

Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers; let me not eat of their delicacies.

Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it.

Psalm 141:4-5, NIV

“Let a righteous man strike me” makes it sound as if David did not care in the least how the correction was delivered: he just wanted it. If parents can teach their children to be this passionate about wanting to do the right thing, they have blessed them for life.

God rebuked David through his companion, Nathan (2 Samuel 12), and it was well received, but this is not always the case. The person who offers unwanted advice often ends up in this situation: “Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?” (Galatians 4:16, NIV). When someone corrects another, it is common for the corrected person to respond by defending himself or by claiming that the one who confronted him is mean and unfair. Similarly, he might mock or give the other person the silent treatment. All of these effectively block the benefit of any advice given.

Because many respond to correction negatively, few people are willing to give it. For this reason, parents need to teach their children to ask for critical advice and to be grateful when it comes. Parents should also want their children to be willing and able to communicate what they did wrong and why it was immoral. Finally, children need an example. Parents need to be thankful when they are corrected, too. Parents should believe this: “Better is open rebuke than hidden love.” (Proverbs 27:5, NIV).

From a Child to a Parent

In the Garden, God’s first instruction for Adam and Eve was to be fruitful parents (Genesis 1:28). If family was high on God’s plan for creation, it should be important and valuable to us, too. A good goal

for children is that they learn, over time, how to be good parents themselves.

Too often today, parents' ambitions for their children to be successful in a career crowd out time spent encouraging them to be good moms and dads. True, some won't have the opportunity to have children when they grow older. The solution to this problem is for parents to qualify their teaching. For example, a parent could say, "If you get married, your wife will appreciate the way you are learning to take care of that, and it will help your family." Or, a parent could ask, "How would a mom handle this situation?" A parent can also explain that even if a child does not marry when he is older, the process of preparing for the possibility will be healthy.

If moms and dads don't encourage their children to think about how to be godly spouses and parents, their silence on the issue may make their children think the roles aren't really that important compared to other activities in life. This would be the opposite of what God wants. It is important that parents promote the idea that children should be getting ready to be parents.

The bottom line is that a person should start thinking about the responsibility of family well in advance of his or her wedding day. Parents should teach good behavior, social skills, logic, compassion, etc., not primarily so that children can meet career goals, but so that they can become great husbands or wives, moms or dads.

A Family Blessed to Bless Others

After the flood, God split the people up by giving them different languages at Babel (Genesis 11:5-9). They spread out in different directions, but God had a plan to reach the people of these family groups. In Genesis 12, God outlined this plan.

I will make you [Abraham] a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Genesis 12:2-3, NKJV

God decided to bless one family so that they, in turn, would bless the world. His plan was family-centric and global in nature. Deuteronomy 4:6 furnishes a good example of a part of the plan at work (NKJV).

Therefore be careful to observe *them* [the commands]; for this *is* your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, “Surely this great nation *is* a wise and understanding people.”

Abraham’s descendants were to be like a light shining in the world to show the people of every culture of the earth (“peoples”) how to get back to the true God. Through Moses, Joseph, David, Solomon, Daniel, the prophets, etc., people of other nations learned about the God of the Israelites. For example, when Israel left Egypt, “Many other people went up with them” (Exodus 12:38, NIV). These were non-Israelites who had come to believe in the Israelite God. Also, consider that after Daniel came out of the lion’s den, “King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth: ‘May you prosper greatly! I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions.’” (Daniel 6:25-27, NIV)

The Savior came from Abraham’s family, which was the ultimate fulfillment of the promise that all people groups would be blessed through him, but God didn’t stop blessing one group of people so that they could bless others. Who is the blessed-to-bless promise for now? “...those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” (Galatians 3:9, NIV) For what purpose are they blessed? They are blessed to bless all the people groups of the earth (Matthew 28:19, Galatians 3:8). Will God accomplish his goal? He will. In the end, Jesus will have redeemed people from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9, NKJV, also 14:6-7).

God wishes to bless us in many ways and that blessing is to be for the sake of others, both near and far. Our finances, our speech, our prayers and our time should show our family’s commitment to give to the people of the world for God’s glory. “And blessed *be* His glorious

name forever! And let the whole earth be filled *with* His glory. Amen and Amen.” (Psalm 72:19, NKJV).

God has a family-blessing strategy today. He wants to bless you, your children and your grandchildren, so that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” I am not saying that you are Abraham but that God, the inventor of family, likes to bless families so that they can bring glory to him. Blessing comes in the form of wisdom, wealth, understanding, experience, the miraculous, love, faith, peace, etc. So, bless strangers. Bless those who stand against you. Bless those who don’t know Jesus. Bless the poor believers around the world. Stick together as a family in order to bless whenever possible because one of God’s goals is for children to be part of a family that is blessed to bless others. Therefore, fellowships should be sending out families, testifying as families, learning as families, and serving as families. Others will be watching and discovering this “wise and understanding people.”

Peace for Today

Grand concepts like being blessed to bless the people of the world dwell together in the Bible with simple instructions that would affect a family every day. The grand and the routine are not independent of each other, but the great ambitions of God have their start in the everyday dealings of life. Day to day, parents should use discipline to help develop delightful children.

Correct your son, and he will give you rest; Yes, he will give delight to your soul.

Proverbs 29:17, NKJV

According to the Bible, without a determined disciplinarian, joy may be lost in the home.

When life’s troubles weigh on parents’ hearts and disappointment threatens their joy, what happens when children come near? Do parents say, “That brings me peace and delights my soul”? Or, do they say, “Oh no, not more trouble!”

A popular children's book called Love You Forever⁵ attempts to capture the concept of a mother's unconditional love toward her growing boy. Consider the description of this boy's childhood. Would this bring peace to your house and delight to your soul? The two-year-old boy "ran all around the house. He pulled all the books off the shelves. He pulled all the food out of the refrigerator and he took his mother's watch and flushed it down the toilet." The mother's response was, "This child is driving me crazy." When the boy was nine years old, "...he never wanted to come in for dinner, he never wanted to take a bath and when grandma visited he always said bad words." As a teenager he "...had strange friends and wore strange clothes and he listened to strange music." The mother expressed that a zoo cage would be a more fitting home for the boy.

The fictitious mother in this book did not have a disciplined child who brought peace and made her soul delight. Her philosophy of parenting did not make these goals attainable, and it makes quite a sad story. The author of Love You Forever seems to hold to the notion that if a mother shows affection toward a child, he will eventually become a well-adjusted adult. To raise a child, in that case, a parent must put up with him for twenty (or thirty) years. Is this what a parent should want?

God says that parents can enjoy their children now. He intends for children to be a source of peace and soulful delight: "Yes, he will give delight to your soul." If parents are not blessed by the presence of their children, they should adjust the way they parent them. They should be careful not to confuse peace with quiet. God made children to be, at times, playful and full of energy. Parents should delight in these times, too. However, if a child rebels against his parents' rules, correction is necessary to maintain a peaceful home.

Parents whose discipline brings about peace on a daily basis will be more likely to raise children capable of blessing others. This short-term goal for children will help keep them on the path toward those long-term goals that impact the world.

⁵ . Robert Munsch, *Love You Forever*, (Ontario, Canada: Firefly Books, 2000)

The Way He Should Go

God wants parents to have long-term goals for their children.

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

Proverbs 22:6, KJV

This verse suggests that parents should think and plan long-term.

The simplistic reading of the verse says that children would certainly follow God if the parents do exactly what they are supposed to do. However, Proverbs is a book of wisdom and should not be understood simplistically. The book presents actions and results that are generally true, but it will not tell us how to get what we want from every scenario. Consider Proverbs 10:3: “The Lord will not allow the righteous soul to famish” (NKJV). Have the righteous never gone hungry? What, then, should we say about Paul in Philippians 4:12? The wisdom of Proverbs 10:3 says that, in general, the righteous should not go hungry, but at times it does happen. Likewise, the admonition to “Train up a child in the way he should go” will normally work out well, but perhaps not always. King Solomon himself turned from the wisdom that he had earlier in his life and worshipped other gods and goddesses in spite of his father, David’s, commitment to teach him reverence for God (1 Kings 11:33, Proverbs 4:3-9). The point is that the wise understand that the sayings of Proverbs are concise truths, not absolute guarantees.

Another mistake one might make with Proverbs 22:6 is to claim that “the way he should go” is a vocation or personal interest. The parent’s job, in that case, would be to figure out exactly how a particular child is wired to find his special educational strategy, pastime or career, but that way of thought is exclusive to modern society. In an agrarian society, people did not have as many ways to express talents or interests. Instead, they helped out with the family and eventually inherited their parent’s work. Therefore, the thought that Proverbs 22:6 is concerned with personality, interests or vocation is misguided. Additionally, the point of the Bible is almost never, “find what you love,” but instead to be content in all circumstances.

Along the same lines, some have suggested that the word “train” in this verse indicates that a unique type of education, a certain rule system, a particular method of discipline or a specific catechism should be applied. The promise, one might say, is only good if a parent figures out the secret meaning behind the word “train.” This is unnecessary speculation.

Perhaps it would help to get down to the basics of Proverbs 22:6 to understand its meaning and purpose. The Hebrew word *chanak*, translated here as “train,” refers to the holy dedication of the temple or a home in Deuteronomy 20:5, 1 Kings 8:63 and 2 Chronicles 7:5. “Dedicate” or “commit” would therefore be fitting replacements for “train.” The two Hebrew words that are translated “in the way he should go” literally mean road or journey (*derek*) and mouth (*peh*). The whole phrase is, “dedicate child journey mouth.” Of course, these words communicate more complex ideas. The journey or road speaks of the path of life. The term *peh* is translated “commandment” 37 times in the KJV (second only to the literal translation “mouth”). Perhaps Proverbs 22:6 could be translated this way: “Dedicate a child to the narrow path of life that comes from the commandments of God, and when he is old he will not leave it.” The verse speaks of a commitment to the commands of God and the long-term benefits to a child, and that is the point. The verse serves to encourage parents to search the pages of the entire Bible to understand how to show children the right road. Parents should follow God’s instruction, example and Spirit specifically.

Proverbs 22:6 implores parents to present an experience to their children that will carry them safely to the grave. Letting children watch shows or play video games may keep them from getting in trouble at home, but it does not solve the long-term problem. Parents have to pay the price and take the time to discover and teach lasting lessons. Nothing else will do.

The Goals

One reason for articulating biblical goals is to make sure that the aims we perceive to be “good” and “better” do not replace those that

are the “best.” This chapter explored the best goals for children—biblical goals. Parents should hope their children display godly character, which is only truly attainable when a person considers himself to be a dependent slave of God. While in the house, children should develop a lifelong desire to obey God’s commandments and should be taught to love and honor others with action. Between children and parents, friendship should be a goal. In addition, children should be taught to embrace self-control to the point of self-evaluation and welcoming correction. Parents should be preparing children to be godly parents who, in turn, will raise godly parents who will also raise godly parents. In the day-to-day, God wants moms and dads to delight in their children, which is possible when they are determined to correct bad behavior. Inasmuch as family members can live out God’s will in these ways, they can be truly blessed to bless others.

Finally, parents should be aware that setting goals is not the same as learning how to accomplish them. Zeal with the wrong strategy is not what we want. I have known misguided zeal. In my desire to help my children respect God and others, I have been anxious and angry with them. I have also been the unkind drill-sergeant-type, believing that if I were the bad guy, I could eliminate my children’s bad behavior once and for all. I have also trusted in moral training rather than pointing to the love of God and the power of his Spirit. Frankly, I have been inconsiderate about my children’s struggle with sin. I have had to cry out, “God help me!” I needed and still need the power of his Spirit and the insight of his Word.

For Discussion

1. Which of the goals outlined in this chapter is most surprising to you?
2. Which goal speaks loudest to you?
3. How are you doing with each of the goals outlined in this chapter?
4. If you had to name your top three goals for your children, what would they be?
5. How could your family’s schedule be improved to promote your top goals?

6. What are some good ways to communicate your goals to your children?

Chapter 3

God the Parent

Although this book cites verses throughout the Bible, it has a special focus on 137 chapters—the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These books are full of information about parenting well.

After the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and after four centuries in Egypt, the family group that was to be the light of the world, Israel, grew quite large. God determined to bring them out of slavery in order to be his people in a new land, the Promised Land.⁶ In this situation, God chose to deal with the people group in a remarkable fashion. He chose to treat the nation as a father treats his *son*. Deuteronomy 1:31 reflects on God’s treatment of Israel these forty years: “the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son” (NIV). If God treated Israel as a son, we can see the way in which God would parent. Deuteronomy also says, “Remember today that your children were not the ones who saw and experienced the discipline of the LORD your God” (11:2, NIV). This means that someone did see and experience the discipline of the Lord, and, fortunately, we have a record of it.

God adopted Israel and treated the nation as a child: “Theirs is the adoption to sonship” (Romans 9:4, NIV). This New Testament verse refers to an Old Testament truth that Israel was “to be the people of his inheritance, as you [Israel] now are.” (Deuteronomy 4:20, NIV, see also Numbers 6:27). A son or daughter receives an inheritance and parental instruction:

From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from out of the fire.

Deuteronomy 4:36, NIV

⁶ . Leviticus chapters 18 and 20 tell us why the people in the Promised Land were to be driven out. They sacrificed their children to Molech and consulted mediums. They also practiced homosexuality, bestiality and incest.

Truly, God was taking Israel under his parental wing.

Some verses, such as Leviticus 26:12, strongly imply the relationship between a Father and his *son* without stating it explicitly: “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.” The verse is in the context of the Father explaining what good things would come to Israel if they obeyed and what trouble they would have if they disobeyed, and it suggests a very special relationship. In Deuteronomy 8:5, the relationship is explicit: “Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.” (NIV). For someone who wants help with parenting, this truth is a major breakthrough.

How should a parent treat his child? The 137 chapters of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy show us. The Exodus was a unique time in history, a time when God acted in a unique way toward a unique nation, and we can learn from it.

The List

Needing to present my observations about God the parent in a coherent fashion, I resolved, with some hesitation, to provide a list of God’s parenting principles as I saw them in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. I was hesitant because I questioned whether presenting seven points on parenting was fair to God Almighty. Was I oversimplifying his wisdom? Would my list encourage people to go to the Bible for parenting advice on their own or would it tend to replace the need for personal Bible study? Would my list of principles encourage someone to fellowship with the Holy Spirit on a day-to-day basis or would my list replace that kind of fellowship for some? My desire is that the reader continue to search the Scriptures for parenting wisdom and keep in mind that God has said that he is willing to live in us. We should relate to and worship him, not lists.

When I took an account of how a loving God *parented* Israel, I noticed the following recurring themes:

1. **Trust:** The observable process from the Exodus to the Promised Land started with a focus of building trust. God’s actions gave the nation of Israel reason to be confident in him.

2. **Judging:** In Israel, God was king and he utilized judges to uphold his rules. This simple system helped Israelites trust and respect God and his laws.
3. **Heart:** Compliance gained by behavior modification did not interest God. He looked at the heart. When Israel obeyed, it was because the people's hearts were set on him. When Israel proved they were not willing to trust or obey, it revealed a collective heart problem. The heart problem would require a heart solution.
4. **Rules:** God made rules about how Israel should act and established them with repetition.
5. **Discipline:** When Israel broke the rules, God used loss or hardship to help bring about a change of heart.
6. **Testing:** God tested Israel to see if the nation would obey. He gave commands and created circumstances that brought unexposed heart issues to the surface.
7. **Reasoning:** Deuteronomy, especially, is a book dedicated to thinking sensibly about right and wrong. God reasoned with Israel so that they would be careful to obey him. He prepared them for the future by reminding them not to repeat past mistakes. He also painted a very clear picture of what good things would come to the nation if they obeyed and what bad things would come if the people did not.

If God's example does indeed confirm the observations I have made here, it would be worthwhile to carefully consider these seven points and, even, to memorize them.

Many of us don't think about parenting as a process of imitating God. Instead, we are looking for results. We want our children to stay out of trouble and, ultimately, to be successful; but that is the incorrect way to think about parenting. If our motive is results-based, we are emphasizing the wrong ideas.

Popular parenting models seek to gain results by focusing either on the will of the child or the will of the parents. Some who give advice about parenting suggest that parents devote themselves to helping draw out the child's feelings to develop emotional intelligence and self-discovery. This requires that the control go to the child which, in effect,

is child-centered parenting. Others advise parents to think of children as welcomed members of the family who are an addition to the central unit, the husband and the wife. Children are loved but expected to toe the line, which could be thought of as parent-centered parenting.

The best way to be a truly successful parent is to adore, admire, obey and imitate God and to consider his examples of parenting. Today we can say, “I am going to act like you, Father. I am going to try to imitate the way you are with your children.” This mindset is absolutely necessary because it is the only attitude that leads to God-centered parenting. In the end, we should want to parent well, not for results, but because it honors God to imitate him. “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children” (Ephesians 5:1, NIV).

Understanding Correctly

I need to do a little housekeeping before presenting my findings about imitating God the parent in detail in the remainder of this book. Most importantly, I need to explain that there are many biblical references that do not fall into God’s parenting example. A parent could do harm if he were to try to copy everything God has done. God is the holy, all-powerful, all-knowing Creator. What he did through history was not done exclusively from a parental perspective. He was showing his greatness and righteousness, and he was preparing the way for sins to be forgiven and for the relationship with him to be restored. He was (and is) also preparing to destroy the earth, judge every person and condemn many to eternal punishment. Just as it is important to find ways to imitate God, it is also important to identify what parents should not imitate because their role is not to be God, but to be moms and dads.

Parents would be mistaken to attempt to duplicate something like the Exodus agreement because it was not indicative of a father-child relationship. If Israel broke the covenant, God had every right to sever his relationship with the nation (e.g., Exodus 32:9-10, Deuteronomy 9:11-29).

Also, the “you” in verses like Deuteronomy 1:31, 4:20, 8:5, 11:2 and Leviticus 26:12 is not “each one of you,” but “all of you” as a group of

people, the nation of Israel. God was treating the nation as a child, not individuals as children. This is an important distinction; and if we don't pay attention to it, we will end up with strange conclusions from our study. Consider Exodus 20:5-6 (NIV, see also Deuteronomy 5:9-10).

You shall not bow down to them [idols] or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

If “you” was meant to apply to each individual, then it goes against God's own instructions that children should not die for their parents' lawlessness (Deuteronomy 24:16, Ezekiel chapter 18). The interpretation “each one of you” in Exodus 20:5-6 does damage to the reputation of God (making him appear unfair) and to the lives of those who believe it (causing them to wonder what punishment they will be getting for their matriarch and patriarch's sins). On the other hand, the passage makes sense when we read it in light of the fact that God was treating one nation—“all of you”—as a father would treat his own child. If the people were to serve God, they would never receive painful discipline; however, if they disobeyed, the nation would receive discipline for several generations. Why several generations? Because God knew how long it would take for a society to change and to humbly seek him (Deuteronomy 30:1-3). We can note that very often, hardship came to Israel for many years at a time (e.g., Judges 3:14, 13:1, Jeremiah 25:11, Daniel 9:2). God's example of parenting is specific to the nation of Israel as a whole, not to each person who was part of the Exodus (e.g., Numbers 25:8, 26:10). This distinction is very important. We must look at the nation as if it were a single person to understand how to imitate God.

Certain rules that God gave the nation would not be fitting in our search for fatherly examples, either. “Tooth for tooth,” for example, does not work in parenting or even in one's personal life, as Jesus points out in Matthew 5:38-44 (see Leviticus 24:20). The “tooth for tooth” rule was meant to punish a member of society who acted violently toward another (and the punishment exactly matched the crime). The individual

suffered loss and society benefited because such crimes against others were less likely to happen in the future. This is not how parental discipline works. A parent's discipline should always be designed with the best for the one who did the wrong (his child) in mind. Thus, commands like Leviticus 24:20 would not apply to parenting.

In order to gain insight from the records of the Old Testament, we must realize that God did not act as a parent in every situation. Also, God made some rules and consequences that were not the kind a father would make, and he did not treat individuals or other nations as children. With these things in mind, we can better investigate the actions of God to understand good parenting.

One more thing. I primarily use three words to refer to loss or hardship meant to help a child refrain from disobedience—discipline, correction and consequence. All of these require some clarification. First, the word *correction* may be thought of by some to refer only to verbal correction, but I mean something more. Second, the *consequence* to which I refer is a parent's well-thought-out choice meant for the benefit of the child, not a consequence a child would suffer because his parents act foolishly. Finally, *discipline* in this context is accurate in English, but as I explained in chapter 1 while making observations from the book of Proverbs, the biblical concept of discipline includes other components like teaching, preparing and developing a self-controlled life. It is a holistic approach. Whether I use the word consequence, discipline or correction to refer to hardship or loss that a parent administers to a child after disobedience, one should always keep in mind that biblical parenting has many facets.

A Unique Case

Another issue to note about God's fathering of the nation of Israel was that if Israel were a "child," it would be a unique case. When we think about everything God did for Israel, we might think that they were an especially decent group who made a few mistakes, but that was not the case. In fact, they were consistently stubborn and thoroughly unworthy of all of God's goodness (Deuteronomy 9:4-6). Rather than deserving the Promised Land, they deserved the description "a

stiffnecked” and “rebellious” people (Deuteronomy 31:27, NIV). The nation came out of Egypt with lusts and strange beliefs. The people were idolaters and seemed to enjoy that lifestyle (Ezekiel 20:6-8, Acts 7:42-54). Recall that when they made the golden calf, they had some sort of immoral party (Exodus 32:6, 17; 1 Corinthians 10:7, 20). To add to this point, we can observe that when they were near the Midianites they worshiped Midianite idols, and Israeli men hired Midianite women for immorality (Numbers 25:1, 8; 1 Corinthians 10:8). The society God claimed to treat as a “child” was made up of millions of people who were experienced in the ways of the pagan world, which made it a unique *parenting* situation. It took quite a bit of time, grief and reason to bring a degree of civility to this rogue civilization.

I do not believe that it is helpful for parents to expect the worst, bemoaning that they have “stiff-necked” and “rebellious” children. Children may occasionally be challenging, but they are not like Israel. They come to us small and needy (usually). By God’s design, they are made to receive guidance from parents year after year as they grow. Heartaches may come from time to time, but much of a parent’s experience with their children will likely be warm and friendly.

Personal Bias

I am firmly committed to expound on the seven lessons I derived from God’s parenting example; but the simple fact remains that for a person to learn, he must want to learn. Almost everyone has established ideas about how to parent. Some have looked to extrabiblical sources for parenting help, and some of these ideas contradict God’s teaching. All of us have had our own childhood experiences which are well engrained in our way of thinking and our actions. For better or worse, these ideas create a bias in our minds toward certain concepts. If we approach the Bible with biases, it may spoil our ability to see and live out God’s parenting example. We may not accept his ideas because we are so entrenched in our own.

People sometimes protect their biases and write off the Bible by saying things like, “These things are personal decisions because the Bible doesn’t give us enough direction.” “Christians need to stick to the

essential truths.” “This topic is just mentioned a couple of times.” “What you decide is right for you, and what I decide is right for me.” Instead of grasping for statements like these, we must trust the Word and its Author.

Another way people allow their biases to ruin God’s plan to help them is by picking and choosing verses to support their point of view. Picking and choosing will, at the very least, leave our understanding incomplete. Looking hard through the Bible and being open to whatever we find is the very best way to learn what pleases God most.

Though biases are personal, humans sometimes avoid people who would challenge their views. This can further inhibit one’s ability to see the truth. Overcoming any biases takes humility and commitment, and it is a necessary first step in truly understanding God’s inspired words. It is fine to consider our feelings, experience, habits, traditions and book learning, but we should make sure that priority in our understanding always defers to the wisdom found in the Bible.

Using the Whole Bible

The seven topics discussed in the rest of this book are based on findings from the Old Testament, so it is important that the reader does not have a bias against it. One should trust that the principles God gave us in the Old Covenant still instruct today.

When Paul taught about Jesus, he taught out of the Old Testament. There was no New Testament at that time, yet Paul “reasoned with them from the Scriptures explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I *declare* to you is the Christ.” (Acts 17:2-3, NKJV, see also Acts 17:11). Those “Scriptures” were the Old Testament. Paul also concluded that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.” (Romans 7:12, NIV). According to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, the Old Testament “*is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (NKJV).

The Old Testament has remarkable value and its teachings can lead our children to Christ. Second Timothy 3:15 says the Old Testament is “able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (NKJV, see also Romans 7:7, Galatians 3:24). The rules help develop a child’s conscience, the historical record gives him a context for understanding God’s ways and purposes, and the prophetic elements point him to Jesus (see Luke 24:27, 44-47).

Some imagine life in Old Testament times to be liturgical and spiritually empty, but following God wasn’t rote ritual. Actually, what they were doing was the opposite in many ways. In animal sacrifice, for example, they were taking something that they owned and knew well to be put to death for their sin, reminding them that because of sin, they would “surely die” (Genesis 2:17, NKJV). Forgiveness was experiential, not ceremonial and liturgical. “The wages of sin *is* death” would have been real to them (Romans 6:23, NKJV).

Some biases against the Old Testament may come from modern living. For example, if a person is put off by the fact that sacrifices were bloody, he is not likely to appreciate the lesson of those sacrifices. We are among the first generations who don’t regularly catch, kill, bleed, skin or pluck animals to be eaten. All these things are usually done for us. Watching animals die, whether in sacrifice or for dinner, was a way of life for people throughout history.⁷ Those experiences communicated a spiritual truth.

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.

Leviticus 17:11, NIV

God intended for all people to learn from observing these Old Testament processes. In sin is death, and in blood is life. The life-blood of God’s son was necessary to set us free from sin.

Our lives are insulated from reality, not just in the fact that we don’t have to kill the animals we eat. Few of us stay outside in prolonged exposure to the power of nature—wind, heat, snow, hail, lightning, rain,

⁷ . Much of the remains of sacrificed animals were eaten by the priests. It was God’s provision for them (Deuteronomy 18:1)

wild animals, etc. Most of us don't live the demanding lives of un-modernized agrarians. If life lessons for those who lived in Old Testament times were derived from experiences we no longer have, perhaps some of us may be disinterested in understanding these lessons. Perhaps we are too quick to ask, "What does the passage say about me and my life?" Instead, we need to do our best to understand what any particular part of the Bible was meant to communicate to the original hearers. This is how we learn its true meaning.

Believers need to understand what was taught in the Old Testament to understand God. They should not brush it off as something foreign to them. They should take time to understand it rightly because in it is wisdom.

Not Exasperated

Bias against the Old Testament will cause us to misunderstand verses in the New Testament. For example, for a long time I misunderstood Ephesians 6:4 because I didn't think about how it might reference the Old Testament (NIV).

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

When I thought about the verse without considering the Old Testament, I was asking questions like, "Was I doing something that exasperated? Did my expectations or my discipline exasperate? Were my rules exasperating? Was it permissiveness or rigidity that exasperated a child?" I was completely missing the point of the verse, which does not try to tell us what exasperates, but what does not exasperate. According to the verse, there is only one thing that does not exasperate, and that is "the training and instruction of the Lord," which was already disclosed in the Old Testament. I didn't get it because I didn't think seriously about how much information on parenting the beginning of the Bible would provide. I had a bias that kept me from searching rigorously through the whole Bible.

The Old Testament is extremely helpful to those without a bias against it. When a person treats it as the reliable Word of God, he can

more accurately understand the New Testament. That person can also better learn about the character and plans of God.

The Rest of This Book

One might wish that the Bible provided specific how-to steps in every conceivable circumstance a parent will face, but that is not the way it is. What we do have, though, is more than sufficient. Whether one has teens or toddlers, strong-willed or compliant children, the teachings in the Bible apply. A reasonable expectation from God would be, “Show me your example and your ways and walk with me.” The answers to questions about specific circumstances will follow.

This does not mean that parenting is a lonely proposition, or that it should be. Parents should seek encouragement, prayer and advice from other believers. Primarily, though, our parenting framework should come from the Bible.

How did God train his “child,” Israel, during the Exodus? He built trust. He understood what it would take to change Israel’s heart. He made rules and required that Israel obey them. He used judges. He knew that discipline hurt the nation for a while, yet he was willing to do it anyway for their sake. He tested Israel to see if they would obey, even in tough situations. He also taught, prepared and reasoned with them. The Bible recorded him doing these things consistently with mercy, love and blessing.

When I started studying the Bible to write about parenting, I didn’t think, “There are seven points I want to make, and I can find a little of each in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.” Instead, I studied and took notes on each book, asking, “What do my notes show that is common throughout?” I seriously considered presenting the information the way I found it, one Bible chapter at a time. I wanted to share the process of biblical discovery, but I also realized that the reader would be better served with topical organization.

The remainder of this book pursues the seven ideas on the list. One chapter considers ways to build trust, one explains judicial parenting, two explore the heart, two address making rules, two deal with

discipline, one explains testing and one considers reasoning about important issues of life.

For Discussion

1. Are you comfortable with the idea that God would apply good parenting concepts in order to care for a nation? Can parents imitate him in this?
2. Of the seven parenting concepts listed in this chapter, what do you think interests you most right now? Which do you think will help your parenting the most?
3. Do you have any personal bias that may affect your Bible study or application of biblical principles in parenting?

Chapter 4

Trust

One generation shall praise Your works to another, And shall declare Your mighty acts.

Psalm 145:4, NKJV

God's relationship with the people of Israel in the Exodus started with trust. I considered using the word "love" for the first observation about God's parenting style, but "trust" better describes the historic record.

According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, people generally choose to be safe (a trusted situation) before they choose to be loved.⁸ If Maslow is right, the newly adopted *child*, Israel, would first seek to know that it could have confidence in God. If Israel were afraid of the Egyptians and the dangers of the wilderness, believing God could deliver them safely would be their primary concern. However, it wasn't just that Israel needed to be able to trust God, but that God wished to be trusted. In fact, it is impossible to please God without finding him worthy of trust (Hebrews 11:6).

Trust is not better than love or *vice versa*. They are different and trust stands out in certain circumstances. If a child said, "I love you, Mom," a mom would find it endearing. If a child said, "Mom, I trust you," a mom would feel a duty to maintain that trust. God calls us to love people regardless of character, but to say that we trust someone speaks of their integrity and reputation. It feels good to be loved, but it

8. Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, (1943):

370-396. <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>

is honorable to be trusted. Trust is a very powerful notion, and it is the right way to approach God.

In the wilderness, Israel might have debated whether God was lovable, but his record would prove that he was trustworthy. When

dealing with a temperamental nation, trustworthiness would last through the up-and-down emotions of the day better than the human perception of love.

God Built Trust

As we read about the great Exodus, the years in the desert and the preparation for the Promised Land, it is clear that God was not only a rule giver. He constantly presented himself as the one with “the mighty hand and outstretched arm” (Deuteronomy 7:19, NIV). By his power, he proved himself trustworthy in the plagues on Egypt, in his presence in the cloud by day and fire by night, in the destruction of Egypt’s army and on many other occasions (Exodus 7-10, 13:21-22, 14:22-30). Right before his death, Moses spoke these words to Israel: The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.

Deuteronomy 31:8, NIV

After forty years of service (and one hundred and twenty years of life), Moses knew the Almighty’s character. God was faithful to the Israelites.

God is trustworthy, which is why we can say to our children, “God will provide.” “God will show us.” “God intends to bless us.” “God will use us for his purposes.” “God loved us enough to die for us.” “I have made many mistakes, but he has forgiven me and taken care of me anyway.” “God can be trusted.”

Trusted Parents

There is a big difference between God’s trustworthiness (having the power to save) and what parents can do (try not to mess up). Although parents should be the kind of moms and dads their children can rely on, they should point to God when they speak about trusting someone. Only God is qualified to be trusted with one’s life. Children need to put their trust in him.

That said, children are much better off when parents are reliable. Listening, playing, being involved and working together are all part of developing relationships. Showing love and having fun help endear a child to his parents. Trust required for a relationship is broken when

parents disobey God's rules, act carelessly, disengage, show pride, focus on trivial issues, become anxious or act out in anger. Being consistent, thorough and logical are important for keeping trust. One of the most important ways to maintain trust is to be fair and judicial with children, which I will address at length in the next chapter. Good discipline also builds trust.

Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!

Hebrews 12:9, NIV

Many parents have been led to believe that their children will respect them less if they use discipline. That idea is completely turned around. The better the discipline, the more children can trust their parents.

Rather than trying to convince their children to trust them, parents should focus on what God requires. If parents honor God with their actions, they will maintain the trust needed for good relationships with their children, and it helps create an atmosphere in which their children can experience the One with "the mighty hand and outstretched arm."

Experiencing God in the Family

There are many life pursuits from which to choose, but only the pursuit of Jesus brings life to the fullest. Parents need to pursue and introduce their children to him. They need to help children understand who God truly is. His power is unthinkable. His knowledge pierces the most hidden thoughts of the human heart. This life isn't a game or a pastime, and knowing this ought to help children know him. This is why the Bible advises people to fear God (e.g., Deuteronomy 6:2). True fear of God shows absolute respect for him and the commands he gave us. Faith must lead to obedience. We shouldn't just fear God, but we should also love him (e.g., Deuteronomy 6:5). How do we show our love for him? We obey him (John 14:15).

Parents must share the Good News, which starts with understanding that we are all going to be judged according to God's good rules. If we have disobeyed or sinned, then we will be condemned. We have earned death. The Good News is that Jesus has died to pay

our penalty. If we trust him enough to turn from our sin and to be filled with his Holy Spirit, we will get his reward, living with him, rather than the just penalty. Parents shouldn't explain this once and consider it done, but rather continue to find different ways and new opportunities to share the Good News. They might consider using simple, clear explanations like the Romans Road, the Four Spiritual Laws and The Bridge to Life™.

Children also need to understand how water immersion relates to the Good News. In immersion, a person acts out being buried in a watery grave and then coming out of the water to new life. It is about being born again by believing in Jesus.

Experiencing the Bible

In order to mature in God, children must experience the living words of the Bible. Parents and children should read and discuss it together. Parents might utilize a helpful Bible study. Or, they could make the learning fun and engaging by reading and narrating while children act out biblical events. There is also an abundance of video and audio lessons that help families think about God and his ways.

Studying together is great, but children should experience the Word of God all on their own, too. One idea is to have children listen to the Bible for 20 or 30 minutes a day. By doing this, children have firsthand experience with the entire Bible at a young age. It is possible to listen from beginning to end several times before the teen years.

Memorization is a good way to meditate on the Bible and retain its truths for life. Families can memorize verses, chapters or even whole books of the Bible together.

Although the following passage was advice for a king about studying the Bible, it seems appropriate for us, too.

When he [the king] takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn

from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

Deuteronomy 17:18-20, NIV

The king's Bible study was a means of redirecting his focus from temptation to healthy thoughts. For the same reason, parents and children should be in the Word daily, which should help to foster a deep appreciation for God.

Experiencing Worship

Parents should teach their children how to turn their appreciation for God into authentic praise. God's presence, worship and prayer are necessary for an individual's edification, and parents should pursue such experiences with their families.

Worship requires that we take time to remember and appreciate who God is and what he has done, which leads to thankfulness. Consider how the Bible emphasizes remembering. Deuteronomy 7:18 says, "...remember well what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt" (NIV). God also told Israel to keep a serving of manna so that the people in future generations would remember how he provided on a daily basis (Exodus 16:32-33). Jesus told the disciples to let the unleavened bread and the wine be reminders of him (Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24-25). Washing each other's feet was also meant to help them remember (John 13:3-17). These memories were to lead to appreciating God.

Since worship is directly tied to remembering and appreciating, it can take on different forms than a worship meeting. For example, in Exodus 17, Moses worshiped by building an altar for remembrance called "The Lord is my Banner" (v. 15, NIV). Families can worship in unique ways as well. For instance, family pictures or videos can be used to stir up thankfulness and to remember that "God has loved us." Memories of God's work in our lives can be written, related to certain objects or in pictures. Families can also worship God for what he has done for others whom they know. They can even remember and

appreciate what he did long ago (consider Psalm 77, 105, 1 Chronicles 16:7-36).

Often, worship does mean meeting together to sing praise and proclaim the goodness of God. The first-century worship meetings were an encounter that could cause a person to exclaim, “God is really among you!” (1 Corinthians 14:25, NIV). A key feature of these meetings was that everyone was encouraged to participate (1 Corinthians chapters 11-14). These kinds of meetings were, and still are, important for children and adults. In fact, meetings in which everyone may share a song, verse or word that God has spoken to their spirit “must be done so that [those assembling] may be built up” (1 Corinthians 14:26, NIV). Finding a meeting in which all worshipers are able to participate may prove difficult. It might mean inviting people to such a meeting.

Splitting up the family and separating children into groups by age may be counterproductive to the goal of helping them become mature disciples of Jesus. God should be worshiped and experienced with the spiritually mature, most of whom will be older. Families should think about how they can worship with other families and with individuals of various ages.

Remembering, being thankful, and worshiping together in a way that allows all to participate according to the Spirit’s leading, builds a child’s faith in our worship-worthy God. Parents should maintain a steady pursuit of these types of experiences with their families.

Experiencing His Spirit

Parents should tell their children of their relationship with the Spirit of Jesus (John 16:1-15). On a regular basis, they should talk about how God is working in their lives, about how they love him and about how good it is to be loved by him. Children need an example, not only of sticking to a moral code, but of actually knowing and trusting God.

In Numbers 11, Joshua was concerned that the Spirit of God had fallen on a few people in the camp and he beseeched Moses to stop them, but Moses disagreed.

Then Moses said to him [Joshua], ‘Are you zealous for my sake? Oh, that all the LORD’s people were prophets *and* that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!’

Numbers 11:29, NKJV

In the same way, God’s Spirit wants to immerse our children and work beyond the confines of normal human capabilities (Acts 19:6). For this reason, parents should teach their children about the Holy Spirit and his gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31, 14:1). All gifts of the Spirit can be understood by studying the Bible to see how God moved in or upon people to do what was beyond their power or insight. For example, Jesus knew that Nathanael was sitting under a tree before they met (John 1:48). This is a gift of knowledge, that is, something supernaturally known (1 Corinthians 12:8). A person who has studied for many years obtains knowledge and the one who loves to learn will seek knowledge, but a gift of knowledge is supernatural. God wants children and adults to seek these types of gifts for his glory’s sake—“that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!”

Prayer

The idea that God lives with and in us is no small matter. It is a big deal, yet he asked us to speak to him in simple terms about all that we need. Supernatural living starts with and relies on straightforward requests. So, families should talk to God together often.

Almost every time we leave the house to go somewhere, one of our children will ask if we can talk to God. It was not our idea but theirs. They have seen that God is close and that he gives to those who ask, so they petition him.

Are any verses more pointed about the need and motive for prayer than James 4:2-3 (NIV)?

You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

This speaks of opportunity to me. We can line our hearts up with God's plan, ask, and get what we need. This is faith.

At times, the ones perceived to be most spiritual among us don't take Jesus' advice: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words." (Matthew 6:7, NIV). Long, elaborate prayers can be motivated by the superstitious belief that God is more likely to respond if we talk to him about what we need at great length. Instead, a family should simply ask and be thankful. Also, parents should help their children think beyond their own needs to the needs of others and to God's plan in the world—"your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10, NIV).

When we seek his provision for the right reasons, we can take steps of faith. Our job is to follow God to places where he will show himself faithful. Watching TV, gaming or wasting time on the Internet is not going to be that place. For Israel, it was the experience of slavery in Egypt, being set free, and following the fire and the cloud. We get to know God in situations that give him the opportunity to show his ability and reliability. This is where a genuine trust in and love for God develops, and we internalize the fact that we are his adopted children.

Our daughter, Meredith, reminds us that God was faithful to lead us in a move to Florida. While we were asking him about whether we should move, my wife, Ginny, was impressed that the baby we were expecting should be called Meredith. We soon found out that the name likely means "of the sea." She was born a month after we moved, and her name is another testimony to God's faithfulness in our lives. Many good experiences and challenges have come since the move, including the writing of this book.

God wants us to ask him first, to experience his plan and then to remember what he has done in order to be grateful. That is why it is so important that we and our children speak to him.

Serving

Parents should give children opportunities to love and serve others, especially those unlikely to return the favor. Jesus said, "But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love

those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.” (Luke 6:32-33, NKJV). Jesus’ words are a convicting challenge to find ways to care for strangers and neighbors. “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” but that is something that is realized only by experience (Acts 20:35, NKJV).

Christian biographies are a great way to ponder the lives of people who have served. This type of book can help children identify with those who have pursued God and loved others.

Blessing Children

One day one of our boys asked me a question about a verse he had read.

Then all the people left, each for his own home, and David returned home to bless his family.

1 Chronicles 16:43 (see also 2 Samuel 6:20)

My son asked, “Did that mean that they were blessed to see him again?” I said, with my arms stretched wide and my voice deep as if to be David, “You are now blessed with my presence again.” He laughed, realizing how ridiculous I sounded. Then I explained that David came in to speak the blessings of God to his family. By his words, he was going to convey some good thing of God to them.

Much was and is still accomplished in the Kingdom of God by speaking a blessing (in Hebrew, *barak*, literally “to kneel”) over another person. It acknowledges that God first spoke things into existence. Now we can imitate him by speaking his principles and will. Blessing is, in some sense, saying, “I consider you worthwhile and get on my knees to intercede so that God will make you successful in the things that matter.” Blessing communicates adoration and worth. It builds faith and imparts the good things that come from a good God. If we hope for our children to experience God’s goodness, we should say it out loud to them. We might say, “God bless you with peace” and “I bless you to know God.” We can ask them, “How do you want to be blessed by God?” We can also encourage our children to bless one another.

This does not have to be a formal affair. One could simply ask a child how he would bless another.

One idea for blessing children or grandchildren would be to read Colossians 1:9-14 as if it was to them (NIV).

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Or, a parent or grandparent could speak Ephesians 3:14-19 or Numbers 6:22-27 to them (NKJV).

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what *is* the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, “This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: “The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace.””

“So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.”

The Bible has many such blessings (e.g., Exodus 23:25-26, Deuteronomy 1:11, 33:1-29, Jeremiah 29:11-13, 2 Corinthians 13:9-11, 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12), and parents could say these to their children to bring the blessings and build faith in God.

God Intervenes

If God exists, and he does, then he will not only prove himself in our children’s lives, but he will enjoy doing so. If parents obey God, he will have opportunity to reveal his good work in both subtle and spectacular ways.

In Numbers 16, Israel was complaining about the fact that Aaron and his family had a special job in the tent of God. In Numbers 17, Moses placed the staffs of each of the perceived-to-be leaders of the tribes of Israel in the tent of meeting. The matter would be settled by God. The next day, Aaron’s staff had buds, blossoms and ripe almonds growing out of it. The other people’s staffs were duds. In verse 12 of Chapter 17, Israel agreed with God’s appointment of Aaron to special, holy work in the tent of meeting. God made his plan clear. Aaron’s staff was kept as a reminder that Israel should not grumble about such things. God performed a miracle to set his *child* on the right path.

We should ask God to use his power as he did for Israel in Numbers 17. I am not suggesting a repeat of the buds and the staff, but that we should ask God to be uniquely involved in our family. We should let him solve problems and provide for our needs and wants.

I believe that God wants to make himself known even in little things. For a time, our daughter was really pressing us for some cowboy boots. I wanted her to have some, and she had been given money to buy them; but when we went to order them, I sensed a resounding, “No,” in my spirit, but I could not tell her why. Her patience was beginning to stretch thin when, unsolicited, an acquaintance gave her a pair of boots that had been “just sitting in the closet” still new in the box. They were the right size and were high quality. We were all encouraged by this nice gift and provision from the Lord. In the process, our daughter was learning

how to trust Jesus. Although cowboy boots aren't a big deal, showing a child that God really does want to be involved in our lives is.

Faith

Trusting God in our thoughts and actions is the solution to life's problems. For example, if we have faith to see our life on earth as relatively short-lived, like a vapor, a mist (James 4:14), then jealousy, covetousness and strong desire lose their grip. Faith in action is also being thankful to God in everything. We know "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28, NIV), but capitalizing on that truth in a tough situation requires thankfulness. If parents endear these truths to their own hearts, they will be able to teach them to their children.

When a child cheats, lies, refuses to obey, speaks negatively about another person, eats too much, takes a toy from someone, is lazy or does any other unacceptable-to-God behavior, it is, in part, for lack of trust in a good God. Disobedience is a symptom of independence from God. When parents see it, they should be reminded to return to the fundamentals of experiencing the Almighty. Parents should help children grasp that our Heavenly Father is close and reliable. They should share the Good News. They should study the Bible, worship and pursue the Holy Spirit with their children. Parents should be open about what God is doing day to day in their lives and help their families remember how he has been faithful to them. Families should speak to God together and should go where God calls them to go and do what God calls them to do.

It is necessary to add that, for children to trust God, parents must combat lies. Evolution between the species isn't fact. Satisfaction can't be found in something or someone. Parents should not be afraid when children debate issues like these. Such reasoning is necessary for trusting God in a world full of lies. When possible, parents should consider persuading by asking questions that help lead a child to a good conclusion rather than by telling him what the conclusion ought to be.

To introduce God our Father and his ways to children it will take time, the right priorities and true intention. If parents are not willing to

design their lives to pursue God together with their family, they are unlikely to end up with good results. Every day presents decisions—easy, convenient, and fun decisions. Parents need to have the gumption to say *yes* to some activities and *no* to others.

One night we joined several families to worship in a living room. Some verses about Passover and the Lord's Supper came up, so we decided to stop the meeting and make unleavened flat bread. While we were eating it, we talked about how the bread had substance. For the Israelites, it was good energy food for the next day's hike out of Egypt. We also talked about how Jesus is the same for us. He is not a small morsel, but one who can fill a person up and stick with him during the day. We should gratefully get our daily energy from him. It was a faith-building night for all of us. The families who met had made the priority to get together and were blessed because of it. If parents are willing to lay down their lives so that their children can take up their lives in Jesus Christ, God will meet them there.

For Discussion

1. Do you look for opportunities for your children to have rich experiences with God? Where do you find them?
2. Are your children introduced to the living, loving God, or to ritual?
3. Are you providing your children with reasonable responses to the arguments of skeptics? What issues have come up?
4. Does God have your children's trust?
5. What would you want to say to bless your children?
6. Are you seeking to submit yourself to God? Are you a trustworthy parent?
7. Have you experienced a time when you asked God for a need and have seen his provision? How do you share that experience with your children? Have your children had first hand experiences with answered prayers?
8. How do you explain to your children the power of the Holy Spirit?
9. What are some options for serving others with your children?

10. What have you found to be beneficial in terms of helping your children to know the Bible?