



# **PARENTING** *for* **Beginners I**

**"Making your home and your heart  
a great environment for parenting"**



If you are reading this, you are probably thinking about parenting. Perhaps you are having a baby or adopting a child. Perhaps you are a few years into this parenting thing. Regardless of the category you find yourself, you are in a very exciting stage of life. God has designed something unique when He organized humanity with moms and dads.

Never done this parenting thing before? Well join the crowd because we all start out as novices. Even if you have had a baby before, each child is a new experience. They bring their own unique personality right from the beginning. So with each child and with each stage of development, you start the learning process all over again.

Whether you are experienced or this will be your first child, you probably feel less like an expert and more like a parenting novice—just a beginner. You are not sure how it all works, but you're doing it anyway, like playing the piano one finger at a time.

Sometimes when you are not exactly sure what you are doing, there still exists an excitement. Perhaps you are picking out colors for the nursery, looking at furniture and deciding what you will need for this little one. Picking up those tiny little outfits and those miniature socks is so precious. There is nothing like being a parent of a new little baby.

We are very excited with you. We see children as amazing blessings from God. We believe that you want to be good parents, even though it is a bit scary.

We have prepared a few lessons/activities for you that are designed to give you a better idea of what God had in mind when He created little ones and when He placed them with parents just like you. These are lessons that are at the core of parenting. Our desire is that your home and your heart will be a great environment for your children to grow into

God's beautiful design for their lives.

Let me share three foundational things that you will need to remember as you move through this workbook.

1. The first is that God has chosen you to parent your child, so you must walk this journey by faith. No one else can walk your journey for you. You must pay attention to the voice of God and the heart of your child.
2. The second thing is that you are not alone while you are walking your journey of faith. We wrote this book because we want to help. Many others walk a similar path (similar, not the same). So, if you are feeling alone, ask for help.
3. The third point is that this will require time, just like parenting. This is not a workout video that requires only 8 minutes a day to achieve perfect abs. This will take prayer, thought, observation, planning, and lots of work. So make an effort with this workbook, spend time, give the ideas some thought; don't make it a task. Think of it as something you need, not because the book is so great, but because your children are.

We would encourage you to start a journal as you go through this workbook. It is a great way to hang on to what God is telling you. Also, if you are going through this as a single parent, your journal will be a good place to write down your thoughts during the "TALK TOGETHER" sections of each chapter. One last encouragement as you go through these chapters, pray over them; prepare yourself to hear from God.

May God bless you and may God bless your family.

Pastor Greg Hill  
&  
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# A TREASURE:



## Your Baby and You

The point of Chapter One is really quite simple. We believe that God considers your baby to be very special. Your child was not an accident, whether you planned to get pregnant or not. God has planned and designed this little life. It takes time to soak in the wonderful implications of that last sentence, so let's get started.

### TALK TOGETHER .....

What is so precious to you about your baby?

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Why do you believe that God considers each little life a precious treasure?

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### ON YOUR OWN .....

Read Psalm 139:1-16 and answer the following questions:

*You can easily add to this list. What messages did you receive about parenting? Gender roles? Marriage? Singleness? Physical affection and touch? How did your family view God, other churches, other faiths? It is essential that we reflect on the messages that were handed down to us, submitting them to Christ and his Word.*

*A common, deadly commandment that prevails inside and outside the church is, "You must achieve to be loved." In other words, we must be competent in the context of competition - in school, sports, recreation, work, neighborhood, church - to feel of worth and value. As a result, many people struggle with an "achievement addiction." It never seems like enough. We consistently feel inferior. Many of us know the experience of being approved for what we do. Few of us know the experience of being loved for being just who we are.*

*Take a few minutes and ponder your family's commandments on this issue. How have they impacted you and your present relationships today? Our history has shaped our current lives profoundly. The cost of ignoring the impact of our past on our present life is costly.*

*God's desire for us to leave our families is similar to the desire he had for the Israelites to leave Egypt. Although the Israelites did physically leave the land of Egypt, a great deal of Egyptian culture and thinking remained in them. In the same way, we may choose to become Christ followers, but in reality we continue to follow, probably unconsciously, the commandments and rules we internalized in our families of origin.*

*The great problem, of course, is when our family's invisible scripts are contrary to Christ's. And when the family commandments passed on to us are so deeply imbedded in our DNA that we cannot even discern the difference, the result can be tragic.*

## **COMPARTMENTALIZATION**

*In 1976 I became a Christian at the age of nineteen. God then transferred me into his family - the body of Christ. While I now was a new member of Christ's family, almost everything I had learned about life had come from my original family.*

*The issue of discipleship now was how to do life Christ's way. Learning how to*

*pray, read Scripture, participate in small groups, worship, and use my spiritual gifts were the easy part. Rooting out deeply ingrained messages, habits, and ways of behaving, especially under stress, would prove far more complex and difficult.*

*My family, like all families, had invisible, unspoken rules that were expected to be obeyed. These included, for example, gender roles, how and when to express anger, views of race and other cultures, the definition of success, how authority was to be treated, sexuality for men versus women, marriage expectations, and views of the church. They were things I didn't want to address, and therefore going back to go forward was something I resisted strongly. Geri would ask me questions about my family past, and I would argue: "What good would it do to look back? It would be too painful. I am just so grateful to be a new creation in Christ." Like most people, I did not want to betray my family. What kind of a Christian would dig up "dirt" and secrets on his own family - especially an Italian-American one?*

*Looking to the past illumines the present. But make no mistake about it; it is painful.*

*Because so few people do the hard work of going back in order to go forward, the symptoms of a disconnected spirituality are everywhere. The compartmentalization of our spirituality from the rest of our lives becomes necessary because there is so little integration. I know. I lived that way for years.*

*Let's go back to Frank and his slow awakening to how his past was impacting his present.*

### **THE PAINFUL FRUIT OF A DISCONNECTED SPIRITUALITY**

*In later coffee meetings at the local diner with Frank, I asked him to describe his family to me.*

*"Our marriage is really better than my parents', at least," he began. "My father's father was extremely abusive physically and an alcoholic. But my father became a Christian. He seemed to come out of the mess of his family. Yet he struggled his whole life with some sort of sexual addiction. I don't know what. He rarely spoke*

- What part does God have in forming this child? (13-16) How well does He know him/her?

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- How close will God be to your child throughout his/her life? (1-10)

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- What do these verses tell you about the way that God feels about your baby? How do these verses teach you that God considers your child a precious treasure?

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- When you read this, how does it make your heart feel as a parent? Do you get excited? Do you feel comforted?

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**TALK TOGETHER** .....

Take time to pray together. Thank God for what He says in His Word about your child. Thank Him for the gift of this life, for how much He cares and for being with your baby...always.

Reread the truth of **Psalm 139:1-16** together, but this time don't think about your baby, think about yourself.

- Is it hard for you to believe that God considers you a precious treasure?

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- Discuss how God's view of you is different from how you would normally think about yourself.

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- How would your life be different if you believed what God said and you started to view your life and yourself, as God does in Psalm 139:1-16?

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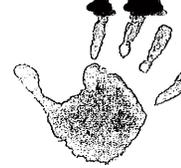
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I hope you are beginning to see that God does not do things by accident, but He is very intentional, like a skilled craftsman. You were God's idea whether your parents planned you or not. You are God's design. Pray that God will speak that truth to your heart, the place where you exercise faith. The more you are able to grab hold of that truth for yourself, the more you will be able to lead your child into that same truth. They are special treasures designed by God.

# A PLAN: For Your Baby and You



God hands you a new little baby that He formed and knows and cares about. As we discovered in the last chapter, this is not just any old creation; this is a precious treasure that God designed. One of the implications of having a design is that **with design comes purpose**. That means there is a plan for that little life. A car is designed with 4 wheels because the plan for that car is to be on the road. A car is not designed with socks and sneakers because there are no plans for that car to go jogging. I think you get the point. Design reveals a plan. Let's spend some time looking at the plan God has for your baby and you.

## TALK TOGETHER .....

Talk together about what goals or plans you as a couple would have for your child.

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What plans do you have for yourself as a parent? In your mind, what would it look like to be a "successful parent"?

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**ON YOUR OWN** .....

Look at the following verses. What are some of the plans that God has for new lives?

- Isaiah 43:6-7

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- Luke 1:13-17

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- Deuteronomy 6:4,5

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How are God's plans different from yours?

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Look at the following verses. What do they tell you about God's plan for you as parents in the life of your child?

- Deuteronomy 6:1-9

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- Ephesians 6:4

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How are God's plans or God's definition of successful parenting different from yours? How are they the same?

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**TALK TOGETHER** .....

Share together what you have learned.

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Pray together.

- Ask God to give you a vision of His plan for your child...what He created them for.
- Ask God to give you vision for what His plan is for you as parents.

Remember, God created that little life. Your baby was His idea and His design. He has placed that precious treasure under your care so that you will lead them into the plan that God has for them.

# DO YOU KNOW Your Family System?

This week's chapter is a bit different. We are asking you to do an assignment where you actually sit down with your parents and talk. The point of this assignment is to pay attention to some of the most formative aspects of your life — your family of origin, and its family system. Whether you like it or not, your past has played a major role in shaping your current belief system of how life and family works. To start off this week's chapter, please read the excerpt below from chapter 5 of Pete Scazzero's book Emotionally Healthy Spirituality (2006).

*Emotionally healthy spirituality is about reality, not denial or illusion. It is about embracing God's choice to birth us into a particular family, in a particular place, at a particular moment in history.*

*That choice granted to us certain opportunities and gifts. It also handed to us a certain amount of what I will call "emotional baggage" in our journey through life. For some of us this load was minimal; for others, it turned out to be a heavy one to carry. In fact, some of us are so accustomed to walking with such excess weight that we can't imagine living any other way.*

*True spirituality frees us to live joyfully in the present. It requires, however, going back in order to go forward. This takes us to the very heart of spirituality and discipleship in the family of God - breaking free from the destructive sinful patterns of our pasts to live the life of love God intends.*

*Frank works for a large corporation as a middle manager. Married with two teenage boys, Frank had been attending New Life Fellowship for over a year when he asked if we could get together. Walking into the diner the following week, it was obvious he was visibly shaken and depressed.*

*"Hi Frank, what's up?" I asked.*

*“Pete, you’ll never believe it,” he erupted immediately, “Maria told me last night that she wasn’t sure she loved me anymore. I asked if there was another guy. She said no, but who knows.”*

*His shoulder slumped. He looked down to the floor and continued.*

*“You know I was never very good at this relationship thing, but I’ve done everything I could to be a good husband, a good father, a good provider. I don’t know . . . I pray. We pray. I have no idea what’s happening.”*

*They’d met in college and married soon after graduation. Frank then served as a pastor for ten years (in three different cities) before eventually going into business. He had recently been transferred to New York.*

*After a long silence, I wondered aloud, “Frank, what do you think precipitated this now - after being together so long?”*

*He pounced, “She’s upset because I told her we might have to relocate again in two years. Well . . .she’s always complaining, more than ever, of me being distant, emotionally unavailable, ‘un-intimate’—whatever that is! She’s also been really upset about my lack of involvement with the boys. It is just so hard for me! I try, but then I slip back into my own world of work and church so quickly that . . . I don’t know . . .I’ve tried to make her happy.” His voice trailed off to a whisper. “I don’t know what to think. And I have no idea where to go from here.”*

*Both Frank and Maria were raised in Christian homes. They know the Bible.*

*For years, they have worshipped God and listened to thousands of sermons. They have attended small groups faithfully and served on their church worship team. They have gone away on Christian marriage retreats and attended leadership conferences.*

*Yet they are miserable.*

*Why?*

*Why hasn’t a lifetime of spirituality in the church, surrounded by the truth of Jesus Christ, transformed deeply their inner lives and marriage? Where is the rich, abundant fruit of a life well lived in God?*

*Why are so many of us living lives with deeply entrenched parts of us apparently*

*untouched by the power and mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ?*

*One critical ingredient, however, relates to our need to go back in order to go forward. This can be summed up in two essential biblical truths:*

- 1. The blessings and sins of our families going back two to three generations profoundly impact who we are today.*
- 2. Discipleship requires putting off the sinful patterns of our family of origin and relearning how to do life God's way in God's family.*

*The pathway to an emotionally healthy spirituality calls for these key biblical ingredients to be central in our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.*

#### THE POWER OF FAMILY

*When the Bible uses the word family, it refers to our entire extended family over three to four generations. That means your family, in the biblical sense, includes all your brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, grandparents, great-grandparents, great uncles and aunts, and significant others going back to the mid-1800s!*

*While we are affected by powerful external events and circumstances through our earthly lives, our families are the most powerful group to which we will ever belong. Even those who left home as young adults, determined to "break" from their family histories, soon find that their family's way of "doing" life follows them wherever they go.*

*What happens in one generation often repeats itself in the next. The consequences of actions and decisions in one generation affect those who follow.*

*For this reason, it is common to observe certain patterns from one generation to the next such as divorce, alcoholism, addictive behavior, sexual abuse, poor marriages, one child running off, mistrust of authority, pregnancy out of wedlock, an inability to sustain stable relations, etc. Scientists and sociologists have been debating for*

*decades whether this is a result of “nature” (i.e., our DNA) or “nurture” (i.e., our environment) or both. The Bible doesn’t answer this question. It only states that this is a “mysterious law of God’s universe.”*

*Consider the following:*

*God, in the giving of the Ten Commandments, connected this reality to the very nature of who he is: “You shall not make for yourself an idol . . . For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:4-6, emphasis mine).*

*God repeated the same truth again when Moses asked to see God’s glory: “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness . . . Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation’” (Exodus 34:6-7, emphasis mine).*

*When David murdered Uriah in order to marry his wife Bathsheba, God declared, “Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own” (2 Samuel 12:10, emphasis mine). Family tensions, sibling rivalry, and internal strife marked his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchild for generations.*

*Family patterns from the past are played out in our present relationships without us necessarily being aware of it. Someone may look like an individual acting alone - but they are really players in a larger family system that may go back, as the Bible says, three to four generations.*

*Unfortunately, it is not possible to erase the negative effects of our history. This family history lives inside all of us, especially in those who attempt to bury it. The price we pay for this flight is high. Only the truth sets us free.*

## FRANK AND MARIA - THE CHALLENGE BEFORE THEM

*For Frank, to follow Christ and do the serious work of discipleship will require him to examine the impact of growing up in a U.S. Army family that moved every three to four years. His father was frequently deployed away from home six months at a time. The strain was more than his mother was willing to bear. Eventually, she ended the marriage.*

*Frank, as the oldest child, filled in the gap his father vacated - at least financially. He worked hard but had a lot of difficulty with friendships. The frequent moves scarred him. He had difficulty getting close to people or sustaining long term friendships.*

*He rarely spoke with his dad.*

*You can see where I'm going with this, can't you? But Maria also has work to do. Why was she so drawn to Frank's stability and good work ethic? Her father was an alcoholic who became a Christian when she was ten. He then buried himself in men's softball and church activities. He remained emotionally absent. Maria, an only child and often lonely, became very close to her mom. They'd been best friends for years, although her marriage to Frank was now putting strain on their relationship.*

*Both Maria and Frank have a wonderful growth opportunity before them. But it will involve a break with the old ways of living and relating they had learned from their families. The ways of relating and thinking they embody go back not only to their parents but their grandparents and great-grandparents!*

*For this reason Christ said, "Unless you love me, more than your mother, father, sister, brother [culture, other significant influences, unhealthy church traditions], you cannot be my disciple" (see Matthew 10:37). He knew our families are flawed and our relationships and patterns of loving are broken due to sin. Regardless of our culture, country of origin, education, social class, or age, the early messages and scripts we took in from our histories powerfully influence our present relationships and behaviors as well as our self-esteem.*

## ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND JACOB

*Genesis, the first book of the Bible, relates how the truth that sins and blessings are passed from generation to generation works out. On one level, the blessings given to Abraham because of his obedience passed from generation to generation - to his children (Isaac), grandchildren (Jacob), and great-grandchildren (Joseph and his brothers). At the same time we observe a pattern of sin and brokenness transmitted through the generations. Truly, more is caught than taught.*

*For example, we observe:*

### A PATTERN OF LYING IN EACH GENERATION

- *Abraham lied twice about Sarah.*
- *Isaac and Rebecca's marriage was characterized by lies.*
- *Jacob lied to almost everyone; his name means "deceiver."*
- *Ten of Jacob's children lied about Joseph's death, faking a funeral and keeping a "family secret" for over ten years.*

### FAVORITISM BY AT LEAST ONE PARENT IN EACH GENERATION

- *Abraham favored Ishmael.*
- *Isaac favored Esau.*
- *Jacob favored Joseph and later Benjamin.*

### BROTHERS EXPERIENCING A CUTOFF FROM ONE ANOTHER IN EACH GENERATION

- *Isaac and Ishmael (Abraham's sons) were cut off from one another.*
- *Jacob fled his brother Esau and was completely cut off for years.*
- *Joseph was cut off from his ten brothers for over a decade.*

### POOR INTIMACY IN THE MARRIAGES OF EACH GENERATION

- *Abraham had a child out of wedlock with Hagar.*
- *Isaac had a terrible relationship with Rebecca.*
- *Jacob had two wives and two concubines.*

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF YOUR FAMILY

*We often underestimate the deep, unconscious imprint our families of origin leave on us. In fact, my observation is that it is only as we grow older that we realize the depth of their influence. Each of our family members, or those who raised us through childhood, has “imprinted” certain ways of behaving and thinking into us. (Likewise our cultures, the media, our interpretation of events that happen to us also imprint us.) These behavioral patterns operate under a set of “commandments.” Some of them are spoken and explicit. Most are unspoken. They were “hardwired” into our brains and DNA, so much so that apart from the intervention of God himself and biblical discipleship we simply bring these expectations into our closet relationships as adults.*

*Consider the following Ten Commandments tablets:*

<p><b>1. MONEY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Money is the best source of security.</li><li>- The more money you have, the more important you are.</li><li>- Make lots of money to prove you “made” it</li></ul> <p><b>2. CONFLICT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Avoid conflict at all costs.</li><li>- Don’t get people mad at you.</li><li>- Loud, angry, constant fighting is normal.</li></ul> <p><b>3. SEX</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Sex is not to be spoken about openly.</li><li>- Men can be promiscuous, women must be chaste.</li><li>- Sexuality in marriage will come easily.</li></ul> <p><b>4. GRIEF AND LOSS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Sadness is a sign of weakness.</li><li>- You are not allowed to be depressed.</li><li>- Get over losses quickly and move on.</li></ul> <p><b>5. EXPRESSING ANGER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Anger is dangerous and bad.</li><li>- Explode in anger to make a point.</li><li>- Sarcasm is an acceptable way to release anger.</li></ul>	<p><b>6. FAMILY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- You owe your parents for all they’ve done for you.</li><li>- Don’t speak of your family’s “dirty laundry” in public</li><li>- Duty to family and culture comes before everything.</li></ul> <p><b>7. RELATIONSHIPS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Don’t trust people. They will let you down</li><li>- Nobody will ever hurt me again.</li><li>- Don’t show vulnerability.</li></ul> <p><b>8. ATTITUDES TOWARD DIFFERENT CULTURES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Only be close friends with people who are like you.</li><li>- Do not marry a person of another race or culture.</li><li>- Certain cultures/races are not as good as mine.</li></ul> <p><b>9. SUCCESS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Is getting into the “best schools”.</li><li>- Is making lots of money.</li><li>- Is getting married and having children.</li></ul> <p><b>10. FEELING AND EMOTIONS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- You are not allowed to have certain feelings.</li><li>- Your feelings are not important.</li><li>- Reacting with your feelings without thinking is okay.</li></ul>
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*about it.”*

*“Actually we moved an average of every three years as my dad took on different assignments for the army. So I never really developed close friends anywhere. Our family revolved around my dad. It was almost like everyone kind of tiptoed around him, fearing his anger - especially Mom. Her whole life, really, was about him. She gave up all her wants and desires for him and us kids. She died recently. But I’m not sure she ever really lived. She just kind of existed.”*

*“So getting close to Maria was really hard for me. I wanted some thing better for us. But it didn’t seem to bother her. She never said anything before - at least until now!”*

*After a few meetings Frank felt safe enough to unload a secret he had been carrying for a number of years: “I was exposed to pornography at age twelve. You can imagine living on an army base at that age. I’ve struggled every since. I feel crippled by it, actually. Accountability groups, confessions, prayer lines - it keeps coming back. I don’t know. Who knows? It’s overwhelming.”*

*Again there was a long pause as he waited for my reaction.*

*“I did some work with a counselor a number of years ago for depression but we never really got to underlying issues. The pornography addiction just grew until I left the board I was serving on. I just felt shame all over. Then I started to get some victory - at least for a while - so I went back to serve on the board.”*

*Frank’s life resembled a jack-in-the-box. While he regularly stuffed down his feelings of being invisible as a child or the feelings of being dominated by his parents as a young child, they often “popped” out in the present. Frank felt like he was betraying his parents talking so openly about their “secrets”, but the pain had finally grown so great he had little choice.*

*Because this is not part of the discipleship or spiritual formation programs in most of our churches, it often takes a crisis to move someone like Frank, or myself, to go in this direction. I have not met anyone who wants to carry the weight and pass on their unfinished sins and baggage to their children and their children’s children.*

*It is against this backdrop that the glory and power of the Lord Jesus offers such incredible hope.*

### **THE GREAT NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST**

*The great news of Christianity is that your biological family of origin does not determine your future. God does! What has gone before you is not your destiny! The most significant language in the New Testament for becoming a Christian is “adoption into the family of God.” It is a radical new beginning. When we place our faith in Christ, we are spiritually reborn by the Holy Spirit into the family of Jesus. We are transferred out of darkness into the kingdom of light.*

*The apostle Paul used the image of Roman adoption to communicate this profound truth, emphasizing we are now in a new and permanent relationship with a new Father. God becomes our Father. Our debts (sins) are cancelled. We are given a new name (Christian), a new inheritance (freedom, hope, glory, the resources of heaven), and new brothers and sisters (other Christians) (see Ephesians 1).*

*Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived at a house where he was teaching, looking for him to come outside. Jesus replied to the crowd inside the house sitting at his feet:” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” . . .Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33-35). The church for the believer was now the “first family.”*

*In the ancient world of Jesus, it was extremely important to honor one’s mother and father. Jesus demonstrated that, even while hanging on the cross. He entrusted the care of his mother to the apostle John. Yet Jesus was direct and clear in calling people to a first loyalty to himself over their biological families, saying “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37).*

*Discipleship, then, is the putting off of the sinful patterns and habits of our biological families and being transformed to live as members of Christ’s family.*

*This is the Christian life. God's intention is that we grow up into mature men and women transformed by the indwelling presence of Christ. We honor our parents, culture, and histories but obey God.*

*Every disciple, then, has to look at the brokenness and sin of his or her family and culture. The problem is that few of us have reflected honestly on the impact of our family of origin and other major "earthquake" events in our histories.*

*Philosopher George Santanya said it well: "Those who cannot learn from the past are doomed to repeat it." For example, perhaps your family defined success by profession or education or money. Maybe there were underlying messages that in order to be loved, cared for, or accepted you needed to do certain behaviors. This impacted your view of yourself (i.e., your self-esteem).*

*In Gods family, success is defined as being faithful to his purpose and plan for your life. We are called to seek first his kingdom and righteousness (see Matthew 6:33). Everything else, he promises, will be added to us. Moreover, God declares we are loveable. We are good enough in Christ (see Luke 15:21-24).*

*Discipleship, then, is working these truths into our practical, everyday lives.*

*Sadly, when we look deep beneath the surface of our lives, most of us are not doing anything fundamentally differently from what our families did. God's intention, however, is that our local churches and parishes are to be places where, slowly but surely, we are re-parented on doing life Christ's way.*

*God intends that his new community of people be the place where we are set free.*

*This requires I recognize the sad reality that all of us bring to our new community our old "Egyptian" ways of living and relating. The following is a glimpse into how this worked out for me.*

### **THE SCAZZERO-ARIOLA FAMILY**

*All our families are broken and marred by the effects of the Fall. Mine is no different.*

*To understand the dynamics of who I am, you have to look at my mother's family, especially the impact of her father. Her father, Crescenzo, had married my grandmother in an arranged marriage in order to come to the United States. He was a "womanizer" who lived as a "married bachelor." He sent his wife and children to work in an Italian pastry shop while he continued living his own separate life.*

*My mother cannot remember him ever saying her first name. Crescenzo would scream, for example: "Disgrace the family and I'll kill you." He would win a pony and give it to another man's child. When one of his friends expressed keen interest in my mom's pet dog (she was about ten years old), he gave him the dog as a gift, ignoring my mother's tears.*

*My dad worked for him in Ariola's pastry shop before marrying his daughter. He once remarked to me, "He treated his dogs better than his children."*

*Francis, my mom, was his only daughter. Her child and teen years were lonely, isolated, and tightly controlled. She never had a childhood and carried the emotional scars of her abuse into our family. Giving and receiving love, enjoying life, fun, laughter, playfulness, joy were unknown to her. She struggled with depression and feelings of profound loneliness her entire life.*

*My father was emotionally unavailable and absorbed in work and in his hobbies. He delegated the raising of the family to my mom while he traveled. One of the tragedies of our family was that his marriage into my mom's family resulted in a cutoff from his own family that lasted more than twenty years.*

*What things then did I bring into my marriage with Geri and the walking out of my discipleship with Jesus? There are many, but here are five heavy "emotional bags" I unconsciously carried into my Christian life for years prior to understanding emotionally healthy spirituality.*

#### *I OVER-FUNCTIONED*

*Along with my brothers, our role was to "make Mama happy" since my dad was absent for her. Even though we were the children, it was expected we would take*

*care of her. There was little room to play, to have fun, or to be listened to.*

*When I became a Christian I naturally began to take care of others. Within one year of coming to Christ, I was leading our college Christian group, taking care of the sheep. I simply transferred being overly responsible in my family of origin to being overly responsible for other's salvation and growth in the church. Is it any wonder I became a pastor to care for others? Is it any wonder that I had great difficulty maintaining healthy, appropriate boundaries as an adult?*

#### *I OVER-PERFORMED*

*Second, the experience of being Italian-American immigrants struggling to make it in the Untied States left an expectation on us: "You will make your parents proud; they have suffered so much for you to be able to succeed and go to college." The performance-based approval that ran strongly in the veins of our family now drove me to "work hard for Jesus." "Prove yourself" was the message.*

*We knew we were loved, but always knew there was a line we could not cross. My brother, Anthony, when he disobeyed my father, quit college and joined the Unification Church. He was disowned and forbidden to return home for years.*

*How many high-achieving, "successful" people are driven by a deeply seated shame and feeling of abandonment, silently crying out, "Notice me!"?*

#### *I HAD CULTURAL, NOT BIBLICAL, EXPECTATIONS FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY*

*Third, my beliefs regarding marriage and gender roles were shaped much more strongly by my family than Scripture. Of course Geri complained. But all the women in our extended family complained about their husbands. Wasn't that normal? Our marriage sure seemed better than most. I was "helping" with the kids, wasn't I?*

*I never observed a joyful, intimate couple investing in the quality of their relationships before their children. Women were to stay at home with the children. Men lead and made the major decisions for the family. I assumed that was God's way also.*

### *I RESOLVED CONFLICT POORLY*

*Fourth, even though I taught workshops on conflict resolution and communication, the basic way I handled conflict and anger resembled my family of origin, not Christ's family. My mother raged and attacked. To avoid conflict, my dad the appeaser gave in to whatever my mom wanted. I took on my father's basic style, taking the blame whenever something was wrong in order to end any tension. I justified it as being like Christ, a sheep going to the slaughter. In doing so, however, I did not love well.*

### *I DIDN'T LET MYSELF FEEL*

*Finally, I did not know how to accept and process my own feelings, needs, and wants. I felt "invisible" in our family growing up, consistently taking care to keep the family together. So questions such as "What do you feel? What do you want? What do you need?" were never asked to me growing up. I was naturally drawn to certain biblical teachings (e.g., Luke 9:23 on denying yourself and John 15:13 on laying down your life for others) while ignoring others (e.g., remember to rest on the Sabbath day [see Exodus 20:18]).*

*A child doesn't say, "What's wrong with this environment where I am growing up?" They think, What's wrong with me? So I grew up feeling inadequate, flawed... defective. If people only knew, I would think to myself.*

*I loved the message of Christ. No other religion in the world reveals a personal God who loves us for who we are, not what we do. His approval is without conditions. Yet for the first seventeen years of my discipleship the profound impact my family history had upon me blocked that truth from penetrating deeply into my experience. Like many people I meet, I lied to myself out of fear, twisting the truth to myself: Oh, Pete, it wasn't that bad. How many people have it so much worse?*

*The truth is that I did "lose a leg in my childhood." I cannot get that back. Yet, because, by God's grace, I have gone back; I can walk. I may walk with a limp, but I am no longer crippled. I am free. But when I look back now and think about how I lived the first seventeen years of my Christian life, I am stunned. . . shocked. . .*

*embarrassed . . . There was so much needless pain!*

### **THE PRESENT IS A WINDOW INTO THE PAST**

*I have examined genograms that outline the major themes of people's pasts both at New Life Fellowship Church and around North America at seminars and conferences for over a decade. Our church has people from China, Argentina, Lebanon, Poland, Greece, Indonesia, the Philippines, Haiti, India and over sixty other countries. We've done genograms for many of them. We have done genograms for poor people from the South Bronx and suburban megachurches in the United States, for Ivy League PhDs and high school dropouts. Often people will say afterward, "Gee, Pastor Pete, I guess my family [or culture, or country] is just particularly messed up."*

*My answer is always the same: "No. All families are broken and fallen. There aren't any 'clean' genograms. None of us comes from perfect families with perfect parents. Most parents did the best they could with what they brought with them into adulthood. And it is likely that some of the things that did hurt us, such as criticism and rejection, were a result of what was handed to them by their families of origin rather than a reflection on us or their love for us."*

*Jane, for example, is a member of a Sunday school class. She often helps set up chairs and refreshments beforehand and cleans up when class is over. Her relationships with the primary authority figures in her life growing up - her father and mother - were strained. They were rarely home and highly critical. Also, she was abused sexually by an uncle as a teenager. Today, twenty-five years alter, whenever an authority figure gives Jane suggestions or constructive criticism, she gets defensive and withdraws. She is unaware of how her unexamined past chains her to unloving, disrespectful ways of relating in the present.*

*The great news is that Jane can go back in order to go forward. In Christ she can emerge a freer, more whole, alive person.*

*You see, even the worst and most painful family experiences are part of our total identity. God has a plan in placing us in our particular families and cultures. And the more we know about our families, the more we know about ourselves - and*

*the more freedom we have to make decisions how we want to live. We can say: "This is what I want to keep. This is what I do not want to bring with me to the next generation."*

*If we ignore truth out of fear, we end up like Miss Havisham from Charles Dickens's novel Great Expectations. The daughter of a wealthy man, she received a letter on her wedding day at 8:40 AM that her husband to be was not coming. She stopped all clocks in the house at the precise time the letter arrived and spent the rest of her life in her bridal dress (it eventually turned yellow), wearing only one shoe (since she had not yet put on the other at the time of the disaster). Even as an old lady, she remained crippled by the weight of that crushing blow. It was as if "everything in the room and house had stopped." She decided to live in her past, not her present or future.*

## **THE BEAVER SYSTEM MODEL**

*The Beaver System Model is one helpful, well-known way of looking at and understanding our families. Based primarily on how they understand their boundaries, families are able to classify themselves along five difference levels of health.*

### *LEVEL FIVE: THE FAMILY IN PAIN*

*This is a severely disturbed family. Real leadership is totally lacking. Chaos, uncertainty, confusion, and turmoil are the adjectives that describe these homes. Conflicts are never dealt with or resolved. There is no ability to look at issues with clarity.*

### *LEVEL FOUR: THE BORDERLINE FAMILY*

*This is a polarized family. Instead of anarchy, as in Level Five, a dictatorship rules here. Instead of no rules, this home has nothing but black-and-white rules. There are rigid ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that are expected of all members. Individuals cannot say, "I disagree with what you said."*

### *LEVEL THREE: THE RULE-BOUND FAMILY*

*This family is not in chaos or under a dictatorship. It is healthier than Level Four. Feeling loved and good about oneself, however, depends on obeying the spoken and unspoken rules of the family. "If you loved me, you would do all the things you*

*know will meet with my approval.” There is an invisible referee, with the rules of the system being more important than the individual. A subtle level of manipulation, intimidation, and guilt permeates the home.*

#### **LEVELS TWO & ONE: THE ADEQUATE FAMILY & THE OPTIMAL FAMILY**

*In these families there is an ability to be flexible and cherish each individual member while at the same time valuing a sense of closeness. Good feelings, trust, and teamwork by the parents enable members to work through difficulties and conflicts. What distinguishes Level Two families from Level One can be summed up in one word: delight. Level One families truly delight in being with one another.*

*Now, ask yourself: Which of these five family categories best describes my experience growing up? How does my family of origin still impact me today? What are the areas I need to intentionally work on in order to move forward in Christ (e.g., boundaries, dealing with conflict, intimacy)?*

#### **JOSEPH - MODELING HOW TO GO BACK TO GO FORWARD**

*One-fourth of the book of Genesis is about Joseph growing up into an emotionally and spiritually mature adult who lived out his unique destiny in God. As with many families, however, Joseph’s family was characterized by great brokenness and sadness.*

*Joseph appears in Genesis 37 at the age of seventeen, the eleventh of twelve sons and the favorite of his father, Jacob. They were a complex, blended family with Jacob, his two wives and two concubines, and all their children living under one roof.*

*Joseph appears immature, arrogant, and unaware of how his dreams and visions from God only further alienated him from his brothers. Their hatred of him grew to the point where they faked his death by the hands of a wild animal and sold him to Egypt as a slave, hopefully never to be heard from again.*

*In many ways the level and number of secrets in a family gives an indication of its level of health and maturity. Joseph’s family, by that standard, was very sick. Joseph’s father, grandfather, and great-grandfather all engaged in lying and half-*

*truths, secrecy and jealousy. Now, they took this generational pattern to a new level.*

*Imagine the impact for Joseph. He lost his parents, siblings, culture, food, language, freedom, and hope in one day! Then in Egypt, while serving as a slave in the home of Potiphar, he was falsely accused of rape and sent to prison for years. A door opened for his release while in the dungeon, but he was forgotten once again. He languished in prison for ten to thirteen years. What a waste! What betrayal! His life, to the age of thirty, appears to be a tragedy. If anyone should have been filled with bitterness and rage for so much family pain, it was Joseph!*

*Yet he remained faithful as a seeker and lover of God. Even when horrific events outside his control swirled around him, Scripture describes Joseph as “walking with God.”*

*Then the incredible happened. Overnight, through the interpretation of a dream, Joseph was pulled from the pit of prison and made the second most powerful person in Egypt, the superpower of that day. He continued to walk with the Lord until his dying day, partnering with the God of Israel to be a blessing to his family of origin, Egypt, and the world. He honored and blessed the family that betrayed him.*

*Joseph went back to go forward. The question is how? What lessons can we learn from his life?*

#### *1. Joseph Had a Profound Sense of the Bigness of God*

*Repeatedly, Joseph affirmed the large, loving hand of God through all his pain and hardships. “It was not you who sent me here, but God,” he repeatedly proclaimed (see Genesis 4:5-8). In doing so he affirmed that God mysteriously leads us into his purpose through darkness and obscurity. God is the Lord God Almighty who has all history in his grip, working in ways that are mostly hidden to us on earth. Joseph understood that in all things God is at work, in spite of, through, and against all human effort, to orchestrate his purposes.*

*God never loses any of our past for his future when we surrender ourselves to him. Every mistake, sin, and detour we take in the journey of life is taken by God and*

*becomes his gift for a future of blessing.*

*Why did God allow Joseph to go through such pain and loss? We see traces of the good that came out of it in Genesis 37-50, but much remains a mystery. Most importantly, Joseph rested in God's goodness and love, even when circumstances went from bad to worse.*

## *2. Joseph Admitted Honestly the Sadness and Losses of His Family*

*Most of us are resistant to going back and feeling the hurt and pain of our past. It can feel like a black hole or an abyss that might swallow us up. We wonder if we are only getting worse. Yet Joseph wept repeatedly when he reunited with his family. In fact, Scripture relates that he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him (see Genesis 45:2). He did not minimize or rationalize the painful years. But out of his honest grieving of the pain, he truly forgave and was able to bless the brothers who betrayed him. And he took leadership of his family to the end of his days, providing for them financially, emotionally, and spiritually. He saw how God sent him ahead to Egypt to save their lives by a great deliverance (see Genesis 45:7).*

*When Joseph did begin to prosper in Egypt after his long years of suffering, he gave his two children names that reflected the pain and sadness of his past. His first son was named Manasseh, from the Hebrew word for "forget," because God had enabled him to forget all his troubles. His second child was named Ephraim, from the Hebrew word for "fruitful," because God had made him fruitful in his new land of suffering (see Genesis 41:50-52).*

## *3. Joseph Rewrote His Life Script According to Scripture*

*Joseph had plenty of reason to say to himself, I don't have a right to exist. My life is a mistake, I am worthless. I should never trust anyone. I shouldn't take risks. I shouldn't feel. It is too painful. I am a loser. Yet he didn't.*

*Our families and traumatic events in our histories often hand us negative messages or scripts that unconsciously direct our lives. These decisions we make, often forgotten, are replayed over and over in adult situations - even when they are not necessary. For instance, who doesn't know someone who was hurt in a church and vowed*

*to himself, "I will never trust any spiritual leader or church again!"?*

*Joseph was very aware of his past. Think of a play and a script being handed to an actor for a certain part. Most of us never examine the scripts handed to us by our past.*

*Joseph did. He thought about it. And then he opened the door to God's future by rewriting it with God.*

*It has been said that the real measure of our sense of self is when we are with our parents for more than three days. At that point we need to ask ourselves how old we feel. Have we gone back to our patterns of behaving more in line with our childhood, or have we broken free from our past to live in what God has for us now?*

#### *4. Joseph Partnered with God to Be a Blessing*

*Joseph could have destroyed his brothers with anger. Instead he joined with God to bless them. For those of us who have been deeply wounded like Joseph, that can feel like a difficult, almost impossible path.*

*Joseph made a choice. It is the same choice we make every day: Is God safe? Is God good? Can God be trusted?*

*Joseph had clearly developed a secret history over a long period of time in his relationship with God. His whole life was structured around following the Lord God of Israel. Then when the moment came for a critical decision, he was ready. In the same way, there are the daily choices centered around our own walks with God that are critical for us to serve as an instrument of blessing to many.*

### **ONE FINAL WORD: OUR NEED TO BE "ALONE TOGETHER"**

*The gravitational pull back to the sinful, destructive patterns of our family or origin and culture is enormous. A few of us live as if we were simply paying for the mistakes of our past. For this reason, God has called us to make this journey with companions in the faith. Going back in order to go forward is something we must do in the context of community - with mature friends, a mentor, spiritual director,*

*counselor, or therapist. We need trusted people in our lives of whom who can ask, "How do you experience me? Tell me the feelings and thoughts you have when you are with me. Please be honest with me." Prayerfully listening to their answers will go a long way toward healing and getting a perspective on areas of our lives that need to be addressed. Needless to say, this takes a lot of courage.*

*The work of going back in order to go forward for sure leads most of us to a Wall in our journey with Christ. We find ourselves disoriented, confused, and shaken by the unknown territory to which this leads. Thus, the next step into an emotionally healthy spirituality calls us to . . . journey through the Wall.*

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Lord, I believe you are a God with great purposes. You placed me into my particular family in a particular time in history. I don't see what you see, but I ask you to show me, Lord, the revelation and purposes you have for me in your decision. Lord, I do not want to betray or be ungrateful for what was given to me. Yet at the same time, help me discern what I need to let go of from my past and what my essential discipleship issues are in the present that must be addressed. Grant me the courage; grant me wisdom to learn from the past but not be crippled by it. And may I, like Joseph, be a blessing to my earthly family, spiritual family, and the world at large. In Jesus' name, amen.

Chapter from *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzero, 2006.

**TALK TOGETHER** .....

List 3 characteristics that are part of your marriage and family that are directly related to the influence of your parents?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

How do you feel about those characteristics being part of your Family System?

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**MEET THE PARENTS** .....

If at all possible, meet with both sets of parents (separately) to ask them questions about their backgrounds. This can be a great way to get to know your parents better. (Pray about a good time to approach this subject.) Ask questions like...

- What were important values in the family you grew up in? How did you know those?

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- How did your family handle conflict?

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- Did your family show outward affection?

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- What did they do to show love to you or to each other?

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- Talk about how your parents dealt with decision making.

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- What was the general atmosphere in your home growing up?

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- Did you talk about heart issues with your parents?

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- Describe your relationship/interaction with your siblings.

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- What character traits do you think you bring to your family from your parents?

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**AFTER YOU MEET THE PARENTS** .....

Make a combined list of the main character traits from both sides of your family.

Talk about which ones impact you the most.

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How do they impact the family system in your new home?

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Psalm 78 gives us a glimpse into God's heart that desires to establish a testimony about Himself which will be passed from generation to generation. God loves to make old things new and heal that which is broken. So, are you able to see any areas where God would want to change negative patterns of your broken family system?

# Getting to Know **YOUR FATHER**

This may be the most important chapter you will read in this book. The truth that is found in here has revolutionized my (Greg's) relationship with God and my experience of being a father. Here it is. I know of no greater place to understand and enjoy the Father's heart than being a dad. Did you get that? I know of no better place to learn about God and what it means for him to be my Father than by being a dad myself. Now, Moms, I do not want you to feel left out because the maternal heart also finds its source in the character and heart of God. I am not saying God is female, but feminine characteristics are found in God and they are divine. Read over some pictures of the maternal aspects of God's heart in Isaiah 40:11 and 49:15.

God is the source of both the fatherly and motherly heart. I believe if you as a mom or a dad can start to get this truth about God, it will not only change your parenting, but it will also change your enjoyment of our Father. To help you get started, I want to tell you a story about some of the ways in which this happens in my life. This is a story about myself and my son Jude.

It was Friday morning just before eight o'clock when I pulled up in the "big truck." I was planning on making some deliveries down at the shore, and I wanted to spend the day with my buddy, Jude. Jude had just turned two so he was ready for this adventure. I took his car seat from the back of the minivan to the front of the big truck. Jude had never ridden in the front. In the minivan he is tucked away in the safety of the second row,

but the safety of the second row also means his view is greatly impeded. However, in the big truck, things are different—not only will he be able to see, but he would be looking down on all the minivans that ride past.

After strapping in his car seat, I ran into the house to get the only other person who matched my excitement. As I grabbed hold of him, I heard his declaration, “I’m-going-big-truck.” With his coat on, we said our good-byes to mom and sister, and I raised him up to his seat beside me. Sitting atop his perch in the big truck, he heard the rumble of the engine and the grinding of the gears. He reacted to every sound. His wide eyes revealed that he knew he was not in the minivan anymore. He looked determined to drink in every sight. About ten minutes into the trip, I glanced over to see how he was doing. There he sat, gazing out the window at this new world all around him, alive with trees, signs, cars, and trucks. His eyes squinted in the glare of the rising sun.

I looked at him sitting there, and I loved him. I loved him for just sitting there looking outside. I loved him for just riding in the “big truck” with me. I loved him. My heart delighted in that little boy. I delighted in the fact that he experienced joy in his new adventure. Wow, what a privilege to love. I realized my heart’s affection and knew I had experienced something divine. I sensed that there was something in the heart of God that I was experiencing as a dad—it was something of God with His son, something of God and His heart for me. God loved me for just sitting there. God loved me for just looking around. The Father loved me.

Then Jude looked at me. Jude, the object that filled my eyes, the one that was instructing me about the perfections of God the Father turned and looked at me from his perch beside me in the big truck. (I am sure I am writing more than this little boy could communicate.) He looked at me and smiled...no, he looked at me and celebrated. His look told me that he was receiving my love and replying “Thanks Dada, I love you too.” He received my love, he enjoyed my love and in that, my heart rejoiced and I cried. I cried because in that moment, I understood something about worship. In that moment, I understood more of the advancing love of God and our call to respond to it.

*Thank you Father for loving me. May I live aware of your gaze and burn in my heart this vision of your arriving, your nearness, and your life altering self-disclosure. May my love celebrate with extravagance the glorious gaze of my God who looks at me and loves me.*

I hope that in this story, you can see how Jude, receiving and enjoying my love as a dad to a son, helped me understand the way the Father feels towards me. Psalm 19:1-4 tells us that, “*The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make Him known. They speak without a sound or word; their voice is never heard. Yet their message has gone throughout the earth and their words to all the world.*” In other words, the creation of God is telling us something, and it is telling us something about its Creator. It is important for us to listen to what creation tells us about God—so much so that Romans 1 reminds us that God has explained himself so clearly in creation that people are held accountable to knowing that He exists as Creator. Often, we get things backwards. We approach creation like an object lesson that God can use. Like God created the world, created man and then thought, *Hey, I have an idea. I could use some of the things that I have created in order to teach people about Me.* However, as we see in Psalm 19, the nature of creation itself is that it declares things about God. That is a big difference. God doesn’t borrow thunder to teach us about His power, God designed it that way. I tell you all of this to make this one point—God designed moms and dads because He wants us to understand what He is like. So as you start to understand the reality of fatherhood and motherhood according to God’s design, you will be understanding the nature of God Himself.

**ON YOUR OWN**



Here is what I would like you do. Spend some time making a list of the ways you understand God through fatherhood and motherhood. Make

sure you use examples and write them down. Be careful not to miss the revelation of God.

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**TALK TOGETHER** .....

Share with your spouse the things God is teaching you about Himself through being a mom or a dad.

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**A LITTLE BIT MORE IF YOU LIKE**

I hope that you are starting to glimpse the potential of growing in this awareness of God's fatherly and motherly heart. I must tell you, it gets even better. If you can understand the nature of a father raising a child, you can start to get a glimpse into the nature of the gospel itself—the gospel being the way God redeems people. You will get insight into forgiveness. You will understand the invitation to trust a person over anything else for life and safety. You will get insight into the truth of inheritance. You will get insight into how you can both love someone without question, yet stand against their self-serving, self-destructive behavior. Spend some time talking about the ways you understand the gospel through par-

enting. I have one more story that I would like to share with you to illustrate how parenting can reveal the nature of the gospel.

Isabella was two years old and on this rainy day she stood before me shaking. A cold sweat had accompanied her mild fever. I bent down, wrapped her in my arms, and brought all 30 lbs of her up to look at my face. Seeing her sleepy eyes and relishing the opportunity to “snuggle on the couch,” I held her close, sat down, and laid back. With my feet up and my eyes closed, I prepared myself for a bit of a nap. Isabella settled quickly and silently, her head on my chest and the tops of her feet on my knees. I was a body pillow made especially for her. As she lay there shivering, I rubbed her arms and back and asked, “Isabella, do you need a blanket?” With her arms pinned to her side, she nestled in as if to get closer, like she could squeeze me tighter without using her arms. Her head never lifted from my chest when she mumbled with that sleepy, soft, contented voice, “No, I just need my daddy.”

I just need my daddy. *God, I thought, that's not ignorance, that's a glimpse of divine truth, a picture of how we relate to You.* As far as Isabella was concerned, she needed nothing but the security of her father and being nestled in his chest. David says it this way in Psalm 57:1. “I hide beneath the shadow of your wings.” *My God, as I shiver in this cold world, may I rest in the security of your being. God, this is such a picture of dependency. The One who gives the power gets the glory. Whoever determines safety is feared. You possess unlimited power. Peter said, “To whom shall we go? Only you have the words of life.” If You, only You, possess power...of whom shall we be afraid. Dear Father, you are perfect provision for the shivering soul and the needy man. I am Your beloved. You are my Father. The way we relate is that I bring You my need and dependency and You bring to me Your strength and sufficiency.*

# The Shepherd's HEART



One of the most powerful pictures of the way God leads us is by being our Shepherd. I realize that we do not live in a culture that understands sheep and what it means to be a shepherd. In fact, until I left the United States, I had never even seen a shepherd. However, I think the imagery of a shepherd leading the vulnerable sheep is not entirely lost on us. Perhaps, a more up-to-date version of a sheep without a shepherd would be like a woman in her 50's learning to use Microsoft Vista without her preteen giving her tech support. Maybe that is not quite the same, but the point is sheep NEED shepherds. What is true of our relationship with God is also true of our relationship with our children. Your children need you to be their shepherd. This lesson is about understanding the Biblical picture of a shepherd and hearing that as an invitation to us as parents.

## **ON YOUR OWN**



We are going to use a couple of passages about shepherding in order to understand the principles of shepherding. Read **Ezekiel 34:1-8** and answer the following questions. (You might enjoy reading the rest of the passage to see God's provision for their failure as shepherds.)

Describe the bad example of shepherding.

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How does poor shepherding affect the sheep?

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Read **Psalm 23 & John 10:1-16** and answer the following questions.

What does a Shepherd do?

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How does a shepherd lead?

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Why do you think John talks about “knowing” in shepherding?

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What is the impact of good shepherding?

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# PRAYING for Your Babies



Jesus invites us many times to the place of prayer. He wants us to live knowing we are dependent on Him. Prayer is the place that demonstrates our belief in needing Him. If we are not praying, then we are either giving up or striving in our own strength. The reality is that apart from Him, we can do nothing, not even parenting. Look at what Jesus says in Luke 11:11-13. I especially like the imagery of a father. *“What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”* Jesus is offering to us the greatest of all gifts, but we must journey with Him in the place of prayer. This is essential to our role as parents—to be shaped as parents in the place of prayer according to God’s desire and to rely upon the work of the Holy Spirit to transform the hearts of our children

## TALK TOGETHER

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Do you know anyone who prayed for you over the years?

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How has prayer been an influence in you or around you?

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**JUST SO YOU KNOW:**

As part of the curriculum for our nursery workers, we encourage them to see prayer as a vital part of their ministry to the babies they care for. Read this quote and share your thoughts with each other about it:

“While it may seem to some that working the nursery has less ministry potential than teaching older children, the nursery actually affords great ministry opportunity. The infant nursery, more than any other children’s department, particularly lends itself to the crucial ministry of prayer for children. Although all the childcare staff can pray for the children in their care, there are wonderful “free” moments in the infant nursery when a worker can pray for a child. When rocking a fussy or sleepy baby, changing a diaper, or winding up a swing, nursery workers can be praying for the babies in the nursery. What ministry could have further reaching effects than bringing these little ones before the throne of the King of the Universe?”

**TALK TOGETHER** .....

Talk together as a couple about when and how you would want to develop patterns of praying for your children.

**ON YOUR OWN** .....

The Bible contains rich material for prayer. Reading God’s Word is a

great place to find out what God's will is for your child. You can use Scripture to guide your prayers for him or her. This section models how PSALM 1 could be used as a springboard for prayer. A sample paragraph follows each passage, demonstrating how each might be paraphrased in prayer.

**Psalm 1:1** "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!"

*Don't let him listen to ungodly advice or follow the wisdom of this world; help him not to listen to the suggestions of evil men or be swept up into untruth. Don't let him follow ungodly friends or associate with those who despise the truth and sin against You; help him to choose good friends and to love the people of God. Help him to love those who would seek your counsel. Don't ever let him mock the things of God or make fun of truth; help him not to be ashamed of the gospel....*

**Psalm 1:2** "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night."

*May he love Your Word; may the things of God be a delight to him. Help him to know the Word and to memorize the Word; may it be a ready defense for him in time of temptation or trial....*

**Psalm 1:3** "He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers."

*Make him strong in You; may he abide in You and bear much fruit. May he always prosper in the things of God; may he be full of truth and overflowing in love. May his life and character be marked with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control....*

**Psalm 1:4-5** "The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous."

*Unlike the wicked, may he stand strong in faith through all the storms of life. May he stand victorious to the end of his life, so he can stand before You pure and blameless claiming the blood of Jesus, his Redeemer. . . .*

**Psalm 1:6** For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

*Watch over his way all the days of his life. Thank you for being a faithful God and for working for your children. . . .*

**PLAN TOGETHER** .....

Together, take 5 minutes a day this week to look at one verse and to pray that verse for your child. Take some time to think about the verse. Ask questions about the verse to God. *Is that really true? Are you really like that God? What must you think of me if you do that? What must you be like if you do that?* This is a type of meditating on truth. Be sure to journal what you learn.

You may want to use some other verses for each day, but below are some suggestions to help you get started.

**Monday:** John 1:12-13. Pray for your child early on to choose to become a child of God.

**Tuesday:** Ephesians 6:1-3. Pray that your child will learn to honor and obey you as parents.

**Wednesday:** Proverbs 4:20-27. Pray that your child will pay attention to God's Word and not turn from it.

**Thursday:** I John 2:15-17. Pray that your child will not grow up loving the things of the world.

**Friday:** Romans 12:1-2. Pray that your child will not be conformed to this world but will be transformed by God's Word.



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