

When Children Grow Away

There is indescribable ecstasy for a couple at the birth of a baby. Here is a new life that is uniquely theirs. A future all wrapped up in a tiny body with little hands and unfocused eyes. It's almost as if a piece of immortality is given in an otherwise very mortal world.

Then come the days, months and years of bonding—of growing, sharing, laughing and crying. It is a lifetime commitment and relationship that nothing can end. Whether near or far, for good or ill, in success or failure, even death can't erase that child from your heart and mind.

Most parents would not trade anything in the world for their children. Words cannot describe what a son or daughter means to a father or mother. But there are some problems that were never dreamed of when that little boy or girl was a baby. They are problems that never got a moment of thought when he was learning to ride a two-wheeler or when she went on her first date; problems that seemed impossibly remote during those super-busy years of school, church, sports, pets, hobbies and panicky trips to the emergency room. They are the problems that come when children grow away. For some these are the problems of a distant tomorrow; for others they are the problems of a painful today.

The first of these problems is the problem of the empty nest. In some ways the "empty-nest syndrome" is a modern phenomenon. When the patriarchs of Genesis were having children at and after age 100 their nests stayed full for centuries. Then for most of history parents have not lived long enough or far away enough for their nests to be empty for very long.

"Empty-nest syndrome" comes from that lost feeling when the last child leaves home. For the first time in most of their married lives parents are alone again. The once messy house is uncomfortably neat. The quiet yearned for is painfully deafening. The center of family activities is now gone. To many it is like a death and they do not know how to cope.

There are some realities that we need to recognize for that empty-nest time of life. The first reality is that it is a transition time. The emptying of the nest is one

of the passage times of life similar to the major transitions of starting school, going through adolescence, getting married or beginning a family. It is a phase that most parents must go through. For some it is relatively easy. For others it is unbelievably difficult. For most, it is inescapable. Often it is complicated by other "passage points" in life such as menopause, job change, physical aging or retirement. When we recognize it as a normal transition of life we are better prepared to view the emptying of the nest as the ending of one important chapter of life and the beginning of another.

Parents who refuse to recognize the qualitative difference in relationships between their children as youngsters and as adults are in for the most difficulty. We must learn to relate as adults-to-adults rather than as adults-to-children.

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Surveys of school age and adolescent children show parents to be the most important people in their lives—more important than teachers, teammates and even peers. But eventually that begins to change. When children grow up, move away, get married and raise families of their own, parents are no longer the center of life. We must recognize the re-

ality that we will never again be as all-important to our son or daughter as we once were.

Nor are we still responsible! When children move away responsibility for themselves dramatically increases and parents' responsibility dramatically decreases. This is hard for parents who once felt full responsibility for their children's clothes, health, schoolwork, friends, spiritual life and everything else. While it is true that the sense of responsibility never fully disappears parents must recognize that their children are now responsible for themselves.

The Bible contains some interesting negative examples of parenting and it is pretty clear in its criticism of those parents. In Genesis 27 Mother Rebecca schemed and manipulated to help her son Jacob deceive his father Isaac and steal the blessing from his brother Esau. Her sons were grown and married but she couldn't give up control.

Another example is found in Matthew 20:20-21.

Mrs. Zebedee was the mother of two of Jesus' disciples, James and John. She boldly asked Jesus to give the place of prominence in Christ's kingdom to her two grown sons. She did not allow them to be responsible for their own lives. She did not face the reality of changed relationships.

When the nest empties it is not only the close of an old chapter but the beginning of a new one. Blessed are those who see the reality of new opportunities. There is a new freedom of resources in time, money, maturity and ministry. Exciting opportunities are available that were impossible when the children were at home. St. Paul writes in Titus 2:3, "*Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good.*" Paul is here describing a contrast. These older empty-nest women could give themselves to being irreverent troublemakers, slandering others and sitting around drinking alcohol, OR they could pass on to others the marvelous lessons God had taught them. The empty-nest should be seen as a reality of opportunity from God to do new and good and different things that were not previously possible.

None of this is to say that it is easy. This transition is very difficult for many parents, but Christians have a God who is adequate for every challenge. His grace is as sufficient for the empty-nest as for the labor room and the nursery. The difference between Christians and non-Christians is not that Christians lack problems and difficulties. The difference is that we have the resources of God. In Revelation 1:8 we read, "*I am the Alpha and the Omega,*" says the Lord God, "*who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.*" Our God is good and almighty for every season of life from Alpha to Omega, from A to Z. Parents must face the reality (and it's a great reality!) of the adequacy of God for the empty-nest!

Bust we also must realize that there are pitfalls to avoid. James Dobson in his book 30 Critical Problems lists four. The first pitfall is isolation. He writes:

Do not allow yourself . . . to pull within the four walls of the house and cut yourself off from people. Keep up your social life even when the easiest thing to do is stay at home. Call your friends; they're probably lonely, too, and get involved with them.

He goes on to say, "most loneliness . . . is not something others do to you. It's something that you do to yourself."

Next on Dobson's list is the pitfall of inactivity. Inactivity is often the twin brother of isolation—it's sitting at home and doing nothing. Often the isolated, inactive person rationalizes with health problems and

other excuses. Actually, isolation and inactivity are more often the cause than the result of the problems. Dobson's advice is the advice we have already read from the epistle to Titus . . . it's to get out and to do something. Initially it may not even be critically important what that "something" is. Get a job. Do volunteer work. Take responsibilities at church. Become an adopted grandparent. Find other people's needs and meet them! Just don't become active meddling in the lives of adult children who need to strengthen their own wings!

Third on Dobson's list is to avoid self-pity. He writes:

Avoid the pitfall of self-pity. That attitude will kill you, quite literally. Because no one can stand the awful thought that he's not needed. I wouldn't entertain it. That's Satan's lie. Start giving to others, bake something, send flowers, write a card. Begin getting into the world of other people.

Self-pity is really a form of the sins of pride and selfishness. It is making "self" the center of life rather than living for God and for others.

The fourth pitfall to avoid is what Dobson calls despair. It's giving up. It's saying that nothing good is going to happen and that life is hopeless. That is unacceptable for a Christian. Our God is a God of the future. With him there is always hope. When we give up hope we are calling God a liar and surrendering to sin. We must renew faith and have confidence in the God of tomorrow.

All of these pitfalls may be natural temptations for the person struggling with the transitions of the empty-nest. But that doesn't mean we have to give in.

I am an experiential expert on poison ivy. In 7th grade I missed 3 weeks of school when I was covered from head to toe with poison ivy. It was awful. My arm was swollen to double its normal size; I had weeping blisters; it was in my eyes, between my toes . . . everywhere! What I wanted to do more than anything else was scratch, but I knew that scratching was the worst thing to do if I wanted to get better.

And the worst thing a parent suffering from the empty-nest syndrome can do is surrender to isolation, inactivity, self-pity and despair. If you want to get better and grab the great new opportunities, don't scratch—no matter how much you want to!

A second problem that comes when children grow away is the problem of a heavy heart. There is no greater fear or heavier burden to Christian parents than spiritually wayward children. Most Christian parents

would rather face disease or disaster than see their sons and daughters turn their backs on God. Adult children who live in sin, who reject Jesus Christ as Savior and who repudiate the ways of the Lord cause more sorrow for their Christian parents than absolutely anything else they could do. It is a burden too great for some to bear. Parents of children who have grown away from the Lord can fully identify with the Apostle Paul in Romans 9:1-5:

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

Paul is talking about his fellow Jews, saying that they by right should have everything spiritually. They should know God, love God, be blessed by God and live for God—and yet they don't. Paul responds with "great sorrow and unceasing anguish", saying that he would give up his own salvation and go to hell if it would bring them to God: "I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers."

Christian parents of ungodly children could say the same thing. If anyone should love the Lord, worship him and live for him it is children who grew up in Christian homes, who went to Sunday School from infancy, who memorized verses and learned how to pray and study the Bible. If anyone should be godly, they should. Yet, some are not. So parents may have "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" to the point that they could wish themselves "cursed and cut off from Christ" for the sake of their children. It is a great sorrow to face with a heavy, heavy heart!

While there are no words to make that sorrow disappear there are important principles to remember. First of all, remember that God cares more about your children than you do. St. Paul loved his nation of Is-

rael with all his heart, but he dared not forget that God told Israel in Jeremiah 31:3, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." Paul loved his people enough to wish that he could be cut off from Christ if it meant that they would be saved, but Jesus was cursed on the cross for their salvation! Parents, never forget that God loves your son or daughter infinitely more than you do. He loved enough to sacrifice his own beloved Son for your child!

Next, remember that God can go where and do what parents cannot. Parents of wayward children particularly worry when their children are out of their sight. Often we are tempted to try and influence our children's hearts from the outside. The reality is that we cannot be with our adult children all the time (or even a small fraction of the time!). We cannot convict our children of sin. There is no use trying.

But God can! Psalm 139:7-8 asks: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there." And in John 16:8 we learn that it is the Holy Spirit's job to convict of sin. Parents can't do that. Parents can't be everywhere. We can't get inside our children's hearts.

But the God who loves our children more than we love them is everywhere and his Spirit does get inside hearts to convince of sin and call to righteousness.

A third principle is to distinguish between relationship and approval. Parents of wayward children may be tempted to cut

off their relationship with their children so they don't seem to be approving of the sin in their lives. That was not Jesus' way. He continually associated with sinners even though he did not approve of their sin—so much so that he was accused of approving of sin and being a sinner himself.

Let me give you an example. The daughter of Christian parents marries a non-Christian in a marriage clearly forbidden by the Bible. I believe the responsibility for parents is to clearly and lovingly communicate their disapproval (if necessary—she may already well know!). But she is still their daughter. That may mean attending a wedding as a parent that you disapprove of as a Christian. But make every ef-

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fort to maintain the relationship, to love and be a parent and do not assume that such a relationship connotes approval of sin.

Another important principle to remember is that we influence by life, not by domination. Too many Christian parents of grown wayward children try to dominate their children's lives and pressure or manipulate them into righteousness. This is clearly not the biblical way. The biblical way to win others is by godly lives. I Peter 2:11-12 talks about this principle in general terms:

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

But then he applies it specifically to the home situation in I Peter 3:1-2:

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.

The way to win our children is the same as the way to win non-Christians anywhere. The way Christian parents influence wayward children is the same as the way Christian wives influence unsaved husbands—by living godly lives. In other words, back off on domination and manipulation and live a godly and gracious life before your children!

A final principle to remember is to keep the joy. St. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:4-7:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

God has given us joy in Jesus Christ. We must not allow anyone or anything to rob us of that joy. We dare not let our children become the center of our lives. Jesus Christ must be the center of our lives. Only when Jesus is the center of our lives and the source of our joy will we be able to have our heavy hearts lifted and be able to best be God's influence in our wayward children's lives!

On November 13, 354 AD in Tagaste, Algeria, there was a son born to a heathen man named Patricius

and a Christian woman named Monica. The son grew up to be a heavy burden on his Christian mother's heart. He drank heavily. He used his brilliant mind to follow Greek philosophy rather than Christian revelation. He lived an immoral life with various mistresses. His mother pleaded and prayed, but he rejected her Christ and her Christian lifestyle.

One day he boarded a ship and left Algeria. He went across the Mediterranean to Italy, to Milan, where he lived more deeply in sin. Her nest was empty and her heart was heavy. But she prayed and lived righteously.

Then this son heard about a great orator named Ambrose. He decided to go and hear him speak because it was said that Ambrose was the premier of all public speakers. As he listened he was touched by the message. He began to feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit in his life. Struggling with the conviction of sin he ran to a garden to be alone and overheard a child in a nearby house say, "Take up and read." He had with him a Bible that he had taken to hear Ambrose speak so he opened the Bible and read these words from Romans 13:13-14: ". . . *not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

There in that garden St. Augustine repented and turned to Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord. He was 34 years old. The next Easter (387 AD) he was baptized and a short time later that year his mother Monica died. But Augustine went on to impact his world and future generations for Jesus Christ like few men in history.

Parents, when your nest is empty, when your heart is heavy, when your children grow away . . . be like Monica who fixed her hope on Jesus Christ.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
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