

Our Children Belong to the Lord

Dennis Williams – Original write-up April 2007

God gave my wife & me four children. Two have spread their wings and have flown off to begin building their own lives. The other two are almost to that point as well. So in just a few years, we will truly have “the empty nest”. It’s been quite a journey being a parent. God has used the experience deeply in our lives, to develop our faith and character, not just our children’s.

One of the most important lessons we’ve had to learn over the years is that our children do not belong to us. They belong to God. He created them. He formed them in the womb. He gave them their personalities and gifted them according to His design. He knew the days of their lives before they were born.

We’ve learned that we don’t know the plans He has for them or what He is going to do with their lives. We also don’t know how He is going to shape their lives, what means He is going to use or what paths He’ll take them down or allow them to choose. Obviously He has used us as parents in significant ways in that process, but He has also used their choices and other people and circumstances to teach and mold and make them into the persons they are today and will become in the future.

Several times when we were struggling with issues in our children’s lives at various times, God would look us right in the eye and say to us, “Are you going to trust me with their lives? Are you going to let me be God in their lives, or are you going to try to be God?”

Answering those questions was never easy. It took time to wrestle with the Lord in the midst of our hearts, emotions, feelings and fears before we could drive down a stake and say, “Heavenly Father, these children belong to you. I will trust you with their lives.” God used these times to deepen our faith in Him, and bring a new depth and meaning to the phrase, “I will trust God.” Those were times of God “refining us as gold” as He turned up the heat and let the dross of our faith & character come to the surface so He could change us more into His likeness.

As I look back, I would not have chosen those experiences at the time, but I praise God for them now, as He taught us (and continues to teach us) unconditional love and strengthened our faith in His goodness. There was a popular book in 2002 entitled *Tempered Steel: How God Shapes a Man’s Heart Through Adversity* by Steve Farrar. In it, the author shows how God uses adversity in shaping our lives. God is working in our lives, molding us into vessels He can use in this life, and shaping us into a Bride for His Son in eternity. He is working out His holiness in us. Struggling with issues in our children’s lives as their parents has been a big factor He has used in that process for us.

When we struggle with issues relating to our children, God often reminds us of who He is and what He alone can do. Psalm 127:1-2 says, “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. [2] It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.”

We are growing in our ability to rest in the Lord, to trust that He is at work even if we don’t see it at the moment. I like 1 Peter 4:12-13 in The Message version... “Friends, when life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner.”

At some point, we have to release our children to God and to His sovereignty. I don't know how issues will turn out or if they will ever resolve themselves. I can't live my children's lives for them. I can't have a goal for my children to love God or be wise because that is something I can't control. My children will do what they choose to do and live their lives by their choices like all of us have done. God has only given me one life to live and to give an account for, and that is mine.

Let me encourage you to keep praying and waiting on the Lord. Do what you can. Do what God asks you to do as a parent. Do the next right thing at each point along the way, trusting God's grace and love to be the difference-maker. Keep pursuing your child's heart. We as parents don't want to make matters worse by our actions or reactions or by estranging our child's heart towards us in some way. "If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live at peace with all men." (Romans 12:18)

The pain of a wayward child for a parent is very real, but God is our comforter. He has promised never to leave us or forsake us. We never know what God is going to do, or what He is going to use in our children's lives. We also don't know everything He is doing at the moment, or how He will use current situations for good in the years to come. Trust His "redemptive grace". He is able to pour out His grace and redeem situations beyond all we could ever ask or think.

There is a poem I have posted in my office, front and center, above my desk. I think about it often in regard to my life and the lives of my children. It is entitled *Just Let It Unfold* (by Darryl L. Brown). I also love the old hymn *He Giveth More Grace* (by Annie Flint). Both have ministered to me as I've walked with the Lord in raising our children:

It is only a tiny rosebud,
A flower of God's design;
But I cannot unfold the petals
With these clumsy hands of mine.

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
To multiplied trials His multiplied peace.

The secret of unfolding flowers
Is not known to such as I;
The flower God opens so sweetly
Would in my hands fade and die.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

If I cannot unfold a rose bud
This flower of God's design,
Then how can I think I have wisdom
To unfold this life of mine?

His love has no limit, His grace has no measure,
His power has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth and giveth and giveth again.

So I'll trust in Him for His leading
Each moment of every day;
And I'll look to Him for His guidance
Each step of the pilgrim way.

For the pathway that lies before me
My heavenly Father knows;
I'll trust Him to unfold the moments
Just as He unfolds the rose.

Hope from God's Word ... Below I've included a list of verses that speak of things that God alone can do. My hope is in Him. Three times in Psalms (42:5,11 and 43:5), David says, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." The last chapter has not yet been written. God is still writing the story of our lives and our children's lives. Choose to believe Psalm 22:5, "To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not disappointed."

God alone is the Creator – He created our children.

Isaiah 45:11-12 ... Thus says the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and the one who formed him: "Ask me of things to come; will you command me concerning my children and the work of my hands? (12) I made the earth and created man on it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host."

Psalm 139:13-16 ... For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. (14) I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. (15) My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. (16) Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

God alone is the Potter – He has shaped and is shaping the lives of our children.

Isaiah 64:8 ... But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

God alone can give a new heart, a heart of flesh

Ezekiel 36:26-27 ... And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (27) And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

God alone can cause things to grow

1 Corinthians 3:6-7 ... I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. (7) So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

God alone makes alive what is dead

Ephesians 2:1-5 ... And you were dead in the trespasses and sins (2) in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— (3) among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (4) But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, (5) even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) ...

God alone is the agent of change

2 Corinthians 3:18 ... And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

God alone guides a person into truth

John 16:8 ... And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment ... (13) When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

Psalm 32:8 ... I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

God alone is the Shepherd of every soul

1Peter 2:25 ... For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Psalm 23:1-3 ... The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. (2) He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. (3) He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

John 10:11-15 ... I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (12) He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. (13) He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. (14) I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, (15) just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

God alone can open eyes to see

2 Corinthians 3:14 ... But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away.

2 Corinthians 4:6 ... For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

God alone does the impossible

Romans 4:17 ... Abraham believed God ... the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Matthew 19:26 ... But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

John 6:44 ... No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.

God alone has the power to make a person a new creation, to make all things new

John 1:12-13 ... But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, (13) who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

John 3:6-8 ... That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (7) Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' (8) The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

Revelations 21:5 ... And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

God alone has the final word in all matters

1 Peter 3:22 (The Message) ... Jesus has the last word on everything and everyone, from angels to armies. He's standing right alongside God, and what He says goes.

2 Chronicles 20:12 ... O our God ... we are powerless against this great multitude that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.

God's purposes alone will stand for our children

Romans 9:15-16 ... For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." (16) So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

Jacob & Esau

Romans 9:10-12 ... And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, (11) though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— (12) she was told, "The older will serve the younger."

Manasseh & Ephraim

Genesis 48:13-19 ... And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near him. (14) And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn). (15) And he blessed Joseph and said, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, (16) the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth." (17) When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he took his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. (18) And Joseph said to his father, "Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." (19) But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations."

Samson – Judges 13:3-7, 14:4

John the Baptist – Luke 1:13-17

Jesus – Luke 1:26-35

Summary of thoughts to ponder

1. We can't be God in our children's lives. Only God can do what only God can do. Pray for your children. Agree in prayer with your spouse. Ask God for wisdom and ideas in each issue you face.
2. Pursue my child's heart – it will keep the door open for the relationship when they go through unwise times. Do our children know we love them? (Story of prodigal son)
3. We cannot have goals for our children to love God or to be wise. We can have desires in those areas and seek to influence our children in these areas, but we can really only have goals in things we can control. The best parents in the world can still have children who don't love God or who make very unwise decisions.
4. We do not know the path God will use to train and develop our children. We must trust Romans 8:28, "In everything God works for good with those who love Him...".
5. Our children are not a reflection upon us in their choices. We must look for respect and affirmation from the Lord, not our children.
6. Our children will be foolish & unwise at times as they grow through life – they are inexperienced and this is how they will learn. They will try many things to try to find out who they are. Be patient – in most cases, this phase will pass – let them learn.
7. Memories are made from moments, not days. In the heat of the moment, ask God for the grace to trust Him, do what is right, walk in the Spirit, and focus on your character and how you need to respond. Err on the side of not estranging the relationship.
8. Do what you can, do the next right thing, and trust God to multiply it; trust Him to be the difference-maker.

Resources – Books

- Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life* – Paul Zahl
Parenting and family relationships formed on grace rather than rules
- Parents in Pain: Overcoming the Hurt and Frustration of Problem Children* by John White
- Prodigals and Those Who Love Them* by Ruth Bell Graham
- Come Back, Barbara* by C. John Miller
- When Good Kids Make Bad Choices: Help and Hope for Hurting Parents* by Elyse Fitzpatrick
- Surviving the Prodigal Years: How to Love Your Wayward Child Without Ruining Your Own Life* by Marcia Mitchell
- The Hope of a Homecoming: Entrusting Your Prodigal to a Sovereign God* by Brendan O'Rourke
- Praying Prodigals Home* by Quin Sherrer
- The Hurting Parent* by Gregg Lewis