

HOW CAN A PARENT FIND PEACE OF MIND?

Do bumper stickers say it all? Is peace of mind found by "living long enough to be a problem for your children"? Or "knowing enough to spend your children's inheritance"? Is peace of mind found by believing that good parents always have good children? Or can we trust that in the end what we do as parents isn't really all that important?

Let's take a look at what our heavenly Father has said about what it takes for troubled parents to find peace of mind.

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WHAT CAN A PARENT KNOW FOR SURE?

There are some things about parenting that we can know. For instance, one of the most important things a father can do for his son is to love and honor his wife. Children reared in homes where the parents do not respect and show affection for one another come into adulthood with some heavy baggage. Even where there is separation or divorce, children are deeply influenced by how the separated parents treat each other.

We also know that special problems can arise when children have children. Biological stamina isn't the issue--maturity is. And the strength of character that goes along with maturity is at the very heart of what parents have to give to their children.

The phrase "children having children," however, can have another meaning. Well into mid-life, we often find ourselves feeling more like children than the parents we are. With children who are themselves moving into physical maturity, we may wonder how they would feel if they knew how often we struggle with uncertainty, self-doubt, and foolishness. For we as parents are supposed to be the teachers. Do our children know how many questions and fears we have? Do they know how often we wonder what they will one day think of us?

VOICES FROM THE FUTURE

What will our adult children say?

You never talked with me.

You were never there for me.

You didn't keep your word.

You didn't listen to me.

You were always yelling at me.

You didn't understand what I was going through.

You only loved me when I made you look good.

You were never satisfied.

You always sat in front of the television.

You embarrassed me in front of my friends.
You never touched me or hugged me.
You and Mom were always fighting and arguing.
You wouldn't trust me.
You wouldn't let me make any decisions.
You were always at work.
You never took the time to have fun with me.
You said mean things that I'll never forget.
You told me I'd never amount to anything.
You used me.
You made life miserable for me.
You never forgave me for running away.
You were rigid and unreasonable.
You never helped me to feel good about myself.
You told me to do things you wouldn't do.
You hit me when you got mad.
You left me when I needed you.

Or will our adult children say:

You weren't perfect, but I didn't expect you to be.
You were always there when I needed you.
I always knew you loved me.
We used to have so much fun.
I still remember some of the talks we had.
I'm so thankful I had you for a dad/mom.
I always knew I could talk to you.
You made me feel so special.
You trusted me.
You admitted when you were wrong.
I'm glad you didn't always let me have my way.
You gave me room to be myself.
You made me feel good about myself.
I remember the stories you used to tell me.
I can't believe how patient you were with me.
You gave me a love for nature, people, and God.
I knew I could trust you.
I always knew you wanted the best for me.
You showed me how to care for others.
I was so proud to have my friends meet you.
I knew you'd love me no matter what.
You taught me how to make my own choices.
You let me learn from my own mistakes.
I knew you always tried to keep your word.

DOES THE BIBLE PROMISE GOOD RESULTS TO GOOD PARENTS?

Does the Bible really assure parents that if they do their part their children will turn out well? Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." In the Hebrew language this literally says that if you train up ("initiate," "imbue," "consecrate," or "dedicate") a child in his own way ("with regard for his own temperament and individual needs at each stage of growth or development"), when he is old (from a word that meant "bearded" or "mature") he will not depart from it.

Some take this to be an absolute promise. Others think it is a general rule of wisdom that expresses the amount of influence a parent has on an impressionable child. Another possibility is that the proverb is teaching that if you give a child a good beginning by training him in a manner appropriate to his own distinct needs, then the positive influence of this early training will remain with him for the rest of his life. He will never be able to get away from what the parent has impressed upon him. That doesn't mean the adult child will always comply with his parents' influence, but he will carry the memory of their training with him until the day he dies.

Overall, the Bible shows that a mature approach to parenting will follow the example of the heavenly Father. He loved as no other parent has ever loved, while also giving His children enough room to make their own choices and mistakes.

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As we read the following pages we may find ourselves wishing that God had assured us of more predictable results. It is actually more loving, however, to parent our children without such a confidence. By looking at the way our heavenly Father has loved us, we'll see that parenting is worth the effort, not because our children will always turn out well but because we've had the opportunity and privilege and peace of loving them the way our heavenly Father has loved us.

HOW CAN A PARENT FIND PEACE OF MIND?

ACCEPTING A LIMITED GUARANTEE

Good parenting doesn't guarantee good children. It only assures that our children will have the tremendous advantage of having had a good parent. Think about the God of the Bible. He was a perfect parent. But look at His children. Adam and Eve were raised in the best of environments. Yet they threw it all away, went the way of the snake, and gave birth to a murderer. Then came Israel, a dearly loved nation who repeatedly and chronically became the incorrigible, rebellious child. Then came the church, who time after time has given her Father a bad name all over the earth.

Ezekiel the prophet assumed that a good parent can have a child who turns out bad. He also reminded us that a bad parent can have a child who turns out good. He argued long and hard against a deterministic relationship between parent and child (Ezek. 18:1-28).

This "tension of the exception" runs against the grain of what we often expect in parent-child relationships. When we see a child from a good family turn out bad, we are inclined to think that there must have been a dark side of parental neglect somewhere. That might be. But what about the children who come from troubled homes and turn out great? Are we as quick to think that there must have been some redeeming and determining parental virtue that we didn't see? Or are we inclined to think that the child rose above his roots and decided that he was going to be different.

It is painful enough to bear the concern that any loving parent feels for the well-being of his children. It is enough to know that we haven't given our children as much love and patience and wisdom as we wish we had. It is all the more pathetic, therefore, when we are robbed of our peace by wrong thinking. It is regrettable when parents experience false guilt because they believe that if they do the right things their children will always turn out well. The truth is that if we do well, our children will be blessed with a good foundation.

HOW CAN A PARENT FIND PEACE OF MIND?

LEARNING HOW TO PLAY THE GAME

Tennis can be played two ways. It can be played with the kind of sportsmanship that is gracious in winning and gracious in losing. Or tennis can be played merely for the win and money. The latter is the legacy of some of the young pros who have marred the dignity of the game with their center-court tantrums, profanity, officials bashing, and bitter excuses.

Parents have similar options. They can concentrate on developing their own self-control, skill, and reactions. Or they can try to divert attention from their own weaknesses by blaming others for their problems. With the latter approach, parenting crumbles into excuses like, "These kids are driving me crazy. They make me so mad. Sometimes I think I'm losing my mind. I know I shouldn't yell and scream, but I can't help it. They bring out the worst in me. Besides, I think a lot of my problem is that I came from a dysfunctional home. I can't stop yelling and hitting and arguing with those brats. I just don't have it in me."

Our first parents started the ball of blame rolling. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the snake. The devil-snake undoubtedly blamed God. But God held Adam responsible for his choices. He made Eve accountable for what she decided to do. The snake didn't get off the hook either.

Today we are inclined to say that our parenting problems are the result of our own parents' mistakes. There may be a lot of truth to that. But a long time ago, the Lord taught His people not to blame others for their own choices. He objected to a proverb used to diminish a sense of personal responsibility for one's own actions:

The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge (Ezek. 18:2).

Again, that's not to say that God denies the problems we inherit from our parents. The Scriptures certainly allow for the existence of learned or biologically inherited predispositions. God said:

I . . . am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me (Ex. 20:5).

The Scripture also shows, however, that being under the influence of our own parents does not suspend responsibility for how we choose to respond to that influence. It is up to us to choose whether we will unconsciously follow the example of our parents, consciously aspire to it, or deliberately choose another path.

An immature adolescent son may push us to the limits. An alcoholic father or neurotic mother may hover in our memories. But none of them gives us an excuse to be adolescent, angry, argumentative, or abusive in our own behavior.

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GOING BACK TO SCHOOL

Just about the time we think we have our education behind us, along comes a strong-willed, 25-pounds-and-growing toddler who quickly pushes us to our wits' end. Suddenly we find ourselves "back in school" again. We begin to realize that parenting isn't just a matter of slowly dumping our accumulated knowledge into fresh, receptive, moldable, hungry minds. Once again we begin looking for more answers.

We develop a new perspective of "the blank slate" view of childhood. As we pick up the chalk of parental wisdom, we find that the blackboard has become greasy and unaccepting of our enthusiastic desire to write and teach something wonderful. This resistance to our teaching will last for as long as we have our children. We will find, to our disappointment, that with few exceptions they learn best when we are looking the other way.

This isn't the way we wanted it. We thought a child should be a fresh and empty document onto which we could transfer all of the knowledge we wish we had taken to heart when we were their age.

Yet learning is occurring whether we realize it or not. We are finally learning to understand our own parents. We are finding out what it is like to desperately love a little one who seems determined to mimic our own faults, while resisting our values, expectations, and dreams.

We are learning something about the heart of our God, which overflows with love for the little ones bearing His name and likeness. We are learning something about His joy. We are learning

about the pain He feels as He sees His children turn a deaf ear to His loving correction (Isa. 1:2).

We are learning a lot about ourselves. We find that these little ones are bringing out the best in us, and the worst. But even the worst isn't all bad. Our frayed nerves, anxiety, and anger can do the same thing for us as a headache or a fever. The temptation to shout and scream, or throw around our parental authority ("Because I said so, that's why!") are *symptoms* that must not be ignored.

These reactions tell us that we still have much to learn about what God can do in us. We need to grow in His insight, His self-control, His ability to move us with dignity through the challenges of leading a little "center of the universe" to maturity. In the knowledge that this is good for us, there is peace.

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LEARNING FROM THE FAMILY PET

Before resenting the comparison, think about it. What does it take to teach a dog to sit up and beg? How many times would you have to swat a dog with a rolled-up newspaper, yell, argue, or tear him down with insults? Chances are that while you might be able to keep your dog off the couch with a few swats of newsprint, the tactic would fail to get him to sit up, roll over, or bring your slippers to you. Even a dog won't learn new tricks unless you give him a treat, a hug, or warm approval.

Training a child is similar. Laying down the law, threatening with punishment, and pulling rank by saying, "Because I said so, and I'm your father. That's why!" only works for a while. After that, all the threats in the world are not apt to make your child mind. They may incite him to rebel in your face, and certainly behind your back.

Children cannot be forced to be good--not indefinitely. In time they will begin doing what they want to do whether you like it or not. The key is to help them want to do the right thing so as to adhere to God's standards and also to meet their own needs. Everyone wants to be free, to be important, to experience pleasure, and to be appreciated. Begin by helping them to feel really cared for. Encourage them. Spend time with them. Do what they enjoy doing. Hold them. Hug them. Do things for them that will show them that they are in your heart, and that they are in your heart for their good.

Don't just give them love. Give them boundaries designed to protect their freedom. Show them what happens to people who refuse to live under the wise and loving rule of God. Find creative ways of showing them that the counsel of the Word of God has been given to us to meet our deepest needs and wants.

Help them to discover the wisdom of the Proverbs, which show over and over again in many different ways that while God could just appeal to His authority, He doesn't. He gives us insight and incentive.

As a parent, you will avoid much frustration by realizing the importance of giving your children good reasons and incentives for right choices. They need to see how they fit their need for pleasure, importance, freedom, and appreciation. To withhold them is to "provoke your children to wrath" (Eph. 6:4) and to lose your own peace of mind.

HOW CAN A PARENT FIND PEACE OF MIND? LIVING BY A CONTRACT

wise parents try not to *make* their children behave. They realize that they cannot force their children to be good any more than a horse can be forced to drink water. You can lead the child to be good, but you can't *make* him. That's the power of the human spirit. Children who are sitting down on the outside can still be standing up on the inside.

This is not to say that you don't have to make children do things they don't want to do. There are exceptions, especially in the early years.

One of the most important lessons to be learned as a parent is mirrored in the way God deals with His children. He is a contract-making God. He tells us what will happen if we do what He tells us to do. Then He tells us, with sufficient specificity, what will happen if we refuse. He offers to help us make good choices if we ask Him for wisdom and readily offers to help us do anything He wants done that we cannot do on our own.

Central to the whole relationship with His children is the matter of choice. If His children go bad, it is their choice to do so. When they suffer the consequences, it is because they knowingly chose to go against His will.

Put this in a parenting relationship. This is the opposite of trying to make all of our children's decisions for them, and then trying to jump in and protect them when they have made bad choices. It is also the opposite of just trying to make our children do what we want them to do.

The best we can do is to show them clearly what we expect, and within what period of time. Tell them what will happen if they obey. Tell them what will happen if they don't. Then let them choose the consequences. If they end up being grounded, if they lose television privileges, if they are not allowed to use the car, if they have to go to bed an hour early, or if they are not allowed to go with the family to a ballgame--it's because of their choice, not ours.

Teaching our children to choose their own path, and then letting them experience the pleasurable or painful results of their own choices, is one of the most important things we can do--not only for them but also for our own peace of mind.

To the extent that we do this, we can stop yelling, threatening, and repeating ourselves. It means we can stop complaining and nagging to pick up the pile of clothes in their room. It means we can lower our voice and be civilized about our expectations. It is to say, "From now on, children, you choose how it will be with you. As God fathers us, so we will parent you. We're here for you, but on these terms. It's your move."

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BRINGING OUR CHILDREN TO TEARS

We live in a day of rampant child abuse. So we have been rightly sensitized to the dangers of hitting a child in anger or using any instrument, including the hand, which might cause serious physical injury. It's just as important to realize that as a child grows older he can be corrected by the use of previously stated consequences of his own choosing (see pp.14-15).

That is one side of the coin. The other side is that a wise and loving parent will not be afraid to bring his child to tears when necessary. The timeless wisdom of the Scripture is clear:

He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly (Prov. 13:24). Chasten your son while there is hope, and do not set your heart on his destruction (Prov. 19:18). Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction will drive it far from him (Prov. 22:15). The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother (Prov. 29:15). Correct your son, and he will give you rest; yes, he will give delight to your soul (Prov. 29:17). Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:11).

These can be hard words for a mom or dad to hear. In the short run, it is much easier to indulge our children than to put up with the fury of their tears and complaints. In the short run, it is painful. But in the long run, lovingly appropriate and timely correction is necessary both for our child's well-being and for our own peace of mind. Often, our children are much like the servant described in the book of Proverbs:

A servant will not be corrected by mere words; for though he understands, he will not respond (29:19).

Let's pray that when we bring our children to tears it will be because of our love rather than our anger. There is no peace of mind promised to parents who bring a child to tears out of their own selfishness.

This means that parents should not give their children reason to say, "You are not being fair with me. You aren't listening to me. You are demanding more than I can give. You are never satisfied. You overreact to what I have done wrong. You refuse to admit when you are wrong. I can't reason with you. You keep changing your mind. You just use your authority as a parent.

You are mean and unpredictable. I never know when you are going to blow up in anger. I'm afraid of you. You are supposed to protect me, but I need protection from you. I hate you for making me cry."

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WORKING LIKE A FARMER

Parenting is more like farming than cooking. Good meals can be prepared in a couple of hours. And by following a recipe, you can be fairly certain of the outcome. But formulas don't work very well with children.

To get a model for child-rearing, you need to track the bread and beef all the way back to the farm where they came from. Now you're closer to parenting. Parenting is far more "barnyard and back 40" than sugar and spice. Parenting is plowing and digging and raking and planting. It's weeding and cultivating and irrigating, and then waiting on the heavens until harvest time. Depending on the year, you might have a bumper crop. Other harvests could be wiped out by bugs, or disease, or too much rain, or not enough rain, or too much heat, or too much cold.

That's not to say that farming is just a game of chance. Farming can be very scientific. Put a loafer or a playboy on the farm and you're almost sure of being hungry in the fall. A good farmer is a hard worker who knows what to do with the specific crops or animals he's raising. He doesn't raise chickens like turkeys, nor corn like alfalfa. Above all, you don't see him trying quick-recipe formulas with a "sure thing, can't miss" attitude. A good farmer is a humble man. He knows his cash crop, but he doesn't presume upon the outcome. All he knows is what his responsibility is at each step of the way. If he gets a bumper crop, it's because he did the right things that were under his control, and also because the things that weren't under his control fell in line.

The apostle Paul alluded to this farming model in his first New Testament letter to the Corinthians:

Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. . . . Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. . . . And we labor, working with our own hands. . . . as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me (1 Cor. 3:5-6,8; 4:12,14-16).

Paul was thinking of spiritual parenting, which is different from raising your own children. But there are strong parallels. In both cases you must do the right thing, work hard, wait on God for the harvest, and realize that you will be rewarded--not for the results but for the loving nurturing you have given.

Peace of mind is found not in trying to force quick growth but in realizing that parenting is a long process of providing what our little ones need, while waiting on them and God for the results. There is no peace or productivity in trying to speed up the harvest.

HOW CAN A PARENT FIND PEACE OF MIND?

ACCEPTING THE ROLE OF A PRIEST

The Old Testament priest Eli raised a child who was not his own (1 Sam. 1:24-2:21). For several years, Eli acted as a parent to a young boy named Samuel. But Samuel was only a trust placed in Eli's care. In a sense, we have a similar relationship to our children. They are like everything else we have in our possession. In reality, they are not our own. Our children have been placed in our care temporarily by the Lord to be raised for Him.

In some ways, the thought that our children are not our own isn't very comforting. We know what it feels like to be concerned about returning a borrowed car or lawnmower that is worse for the wear. On the other hand, realizing that our children are the Lord's is a very liberating thought. It means that the child's rightful owner will make sure that I have all the resources I need to care for the child in God's behalf.

Parents are also like Eli in that they are like priests. In Hebrews 5:1-4 we are shown that a priest intercedes in behalf of his people, and that he does so in the awareness of his own weakness. Because he knows his own problems, he can be sympathetic and compassionate in dealing with those who come to him for help. The author of Hebrews wrote this about the high priest:

He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also beset by weakness. Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins (Heb. 5:2-3).

Since this was spoken about priests who served prior to the coming of Christ, our great High Priest, some might think it outdated. Yet, the same author also said of Christ:

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15).

The New Testament now calls the children of God a kingdom of priests (1 Pet. 2:5,9).

Think of the implications for a parent. It doesn't make sense for us to expect our children to be better than we were. We might long for them to make good choices. We might pray that they will be wiser than their years. But we haven't always been wise and wonderful. We've been where our children now are. We've been just as foolish, just as shortsighted, just as naive. What we have to offer them is not a perfect example, but sympathetic, compassionate hearts that continually go out to them in love and to God their heavenly Father--and rightful owner--on their behalf.

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GROWING LIKE GRAPES ON A VINE

The secret of the fruit is in the branch and root. Good parenting is the fruit of good character that is rooted and growing in God Himself. The Bible calls this character the fruit of the Spirit. That is to say that it comes from the Holy Spirit of God rather than from our own natural ability or energy. Listen to what the apostle Paul wrote, and think about how it assures good parenting:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25).

The reason Paul's words are so important for parents is that they not only reflect the qualities that assure good parenting, but they also point to resources of the Spirit we don't have to find in ourselves or in our own experience. If Paul is right, then our own sense of inadequacy and our own history in dysfunctional relationships can actually be put to work for us. Those can be the needs that drive us to find in the Spirit of our heavenly Father the parenting qualities that are not natural to us.

Listen to what Paul wrote to Christians who had been trying to live in their own strength:

Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain--if indeed it was in vain? Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? (Gal. 3:3-5).

The spiritual resources of character Paul was talking about are not the result of trying to live by the ideals of God. They come when we believe and trust what God says He is willing and able to do in us.

We need to remind one another continually that the secret to good parenting is like fruit that is rooted in the branches and roots of the Spirit of Christ. When we are in agreement with Christ and His Word (Jn. 15:1-14), then we will be growing in our experience of the fruit of the Spirit:

- supernatural love vs. sheer effort and fatigue
- good sense of humor (joy) vs. pessimism
- calm spirit vs. anxiety
- patient attitude vs. quick anger
- kindness vs. meanness
- good motives and intentions vs. selfishness
- promise-keeping vs. breaking your word
- gentleness vs. harshness

- self-control vs. addictive behavior

HOW CAN A PARENT FIND PEACE OF MIND? LOOKING FOR TEACHABLE MOMENTS

In the Old Testament, God taught His people to build rock piles so that their children would one day ask why the stones were there. When the children asked, the parents were to be ready to tell the story of how the Lord of Israel had wonderfully met their needs in that place. The secret was in being ready for teachable moments.

When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, "What are these stones?" then you shall let your children know (Josh. 4:21-22).

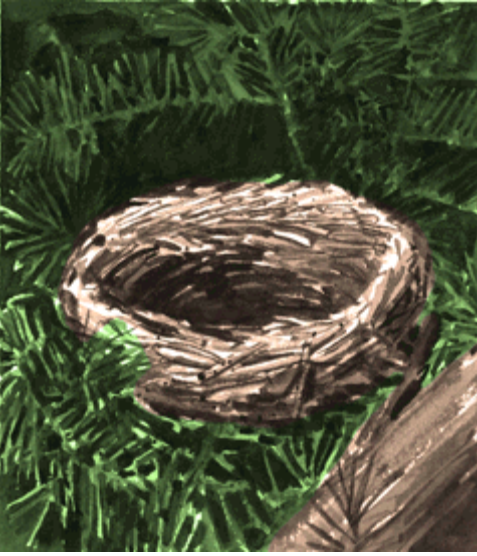
The parent-teachers of Israel were not to be boring. They were to do things that would encourage their children to ask, "Dad, Mom, why do we do this? Why do we always have an empty place-setting at our table?" (See also Dt. 6:6-9,20-25.)

The father who wrote the Proverbs for his son realized the power of a word spoken at just the right moment (Prov. 15:23; 25:11). He came from a tradition that used creative ways to open the hearts of children to life-changing perspectives. The Jews used education by rockpiles, by riddles, by object lessons, by drama, by word pictures, and by seeing children, over all, as being willing and active participants in their own learning.

Such child-ready object lessons are different from the kind of family devotions that are forced, ritualistic, and academic. These seldom have the desired spiritual effect. Unless our words come at teachable moments, they are not likely to draw our children's hearts toward their God. About all forced devotions do is help a parent feel less guilty about something that he feels he should do.

Planning for and taking advantage of teachable moments is far better. Tender discussions about life while enjoying an afternoon in a fishing boat, a walk along a wooded field, a drive through the countryside, a spontaneous discussion during mealtime, or a tender Bible story and prayer at bedtime are usually far better received (Dt. 6:6-9) and much more effective. The challenge is that you can't teach children this way without a lot of involvement and creative time spent with them.

Now, I'm not saying that we should not have mealtime devotions with our children. If it is working well and doing what you hoped it would do, then continue. But if all you are doing is trying to force your children to learn something, chances are they may be learning to resent not only Bible reading and prayer, but also you and your Lord.



HOW CAN A PARENT FIND PEACE OF MIND? DYING A THOUSAND DEATHS

The most effective parents die a thousand deaths. Sometimes it is the result of being embarrassed by the actions of their children. Sometimes it is the result of utter frustration and fatigue. Sometimes it is over the deep concern of a son or daughter's shortsighted and self-destructive choices. But often these parents voluntarily die to their own desires just because this is what it takes to bring children into the world.

No one said that bringing children to maturity would be easy. It's hard for a mother to go through the contractions of labor. It's hard for her to give years of her life to infants and toddlers who constantly demand attention. It's hard for a wife and husband to give up the freedoms they enjoyed before children. It's hard for a father to put aside his strong will and give his son the space he needs to make his own decisions. It's hard to give your children more and more freedom with less and less control so that they can begin to feel the responsibilities of maturity. It's hard not to jump in and rescue them when they get themselves in trouble. It's hard to remain firm in providing reasonable boundaries and controls so that they are not left entirely on their own. It would be easier, sometimes, to give in and get them off your back. It's hard to continually help them to see that the real issue is not what you want them to do but what they are going to choose and with what consequences. It's hard not to jump in and take control. It's hard to be patient enough to give them as much time as they need to grow up. It's like dying to let them go out into the cold, cruel world.

It's hard to pray for them daily. It's harder yet to pray in a way that reflects our surrender to God. It's hard to say to the Lord, "Do whatever it takes to bring my children to You and to maturity of faith and love. Lord, do whatever it takes."

Ironically, we are inclined to think that taking an easier path will result in less pain and more joy. Good parenting, however, is the result of Christlike character. And unless we follow Christ's lead and that of the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 4:1-12), we will never see the difference Christ's Spirit can make in us. Only when we die to ourselves do our children get the benefit of Christ parenting through us.

HOW CAN A PARENT FIND PEACE OF MIND? PREPARING FOR AN EMPTY NEST

Empty-nest syndrome has established itself as a real dimension of mid-life crisis. Life after children is now recognized as another threat to marriages that have survived earlier tests. Parents who have lived all their lives for their children suddenly find themselves rattling around in an empty house. They become restless, unsatisfied, and irritable. Anxiety, anger, and depression can come in slowly like a fog.

To finally have the blessing of a parent can be like a soothing drink of water so satisfying that you remember that drink every day for the rest of your life.

If empty-nest syndrome marks yet another test for parents and their marriage, it should also be seen as the mark of success and hope for the child.

Children are not born to be children. The highest good is not to be protected and directed by a hovering, smothering parent. From the day a baby is born, his parents should understand that their mission is to prepare this child to fly.

Maturity is better than immaturity, independence is better than dependence, and the day of departure is better than the day of arrival.

If after working through the normal pains of departure, parents are still apt to be overinvolved, overprotective, and meddling in their adult children's lives, then there is a need for some housecleaning. It might be time to acknowledge and discard a pattern of selfish control and smothering. It might be time to accept the fact that we have been overinvolved, not for the child's good but to indulge our own selfish needs. It is difficult to let our children go, especially if we have become dependent on them. Dependence signals the child in us, and is a warning that we are not finding our satisfaction and peace in God Himself.

It is interesting to note the way God parents His children. In both Old and New Testament times, the heavenly Father temporarily nurtured His children with a heavy provision of miraculous signs and wonders to assure them of His presence. In time, He withdrew the obvious presence of the miraculous and forced His children to sink or swim in the disciplines of faith.

God has made man and woman to leave their parents and cleave to a new mate of their own. It is in this new sphere of independent living that a person is the freest to learn to love God, parents, mate, children, and friends. It is here that we can find the peace of mind God provides.

HOW CAN A PARENT FIND PEACE OF MIND? BEING LATE RATHER THAN NEVER

Saying I'm sorry is better late than never saying it at all. Saying I love you is better said on a deathbed than to die without ever having said it. Finding ways to encourage your children late in life is better than letting them come to their own end wondering, "Did Mom or Dad ever really care about me?" One of the most amazing experiences is to see the good that a few words of encouragement can do even at the end of that parent's life.

There is no way of changing the wrongs of a lifetime. The human consequences of selfish, alcoholic, adulterous, abusive, workaholic parenting cannot be wiped away like unwanted chalk on a blackboard. But you can know the joys of the Teacher who taught His followers to live one day at a time, confess their wrongs, make restitution where possible, and thereby know God's peace.

But what if the child dies before the parent has a chance to show that care? You can still dignify and honor the life and memory of that child. You can put your mistakes to work for someone else who could benefit by being cared for by you.

The apostle Paul illustrated the possibility of putting our mistakes to work for others. He became like a father to many after having made many violent mistakes. In his early years, he was an angry and abusive man (Acts 8:1-3). His actions left memories that weighed heavily on him (1 Tim. 1:15). Yet he didn't give up. He went on to become one of the most important parent figures of all time. Driven by the mistakes of his past, and by the forgiving love of God, he went on to be like a father to those who soaked up his love, his wisdom, his example, and his prayers.

After finding out how much God loved him, after a change of heart, and after experiencing the redeeming strength of Christ, Paul became known for his example, his advice, his correction, and his warm, affirming words of encouragement. He learned to provide the gentleness of a mother and the strong comfort and challenge of a father (1 Th. 2:7-12). His "adopted" children would certainly say, "Better late than never."

WHOSE CHILD ARE YOU?

You don't have to be the adult child of a divorce, or of an alcoholic, a workaholic, or a physically, verbally, or sexually abusive mom or dad to have doubts about yourself as a parent. All of us have questions about what we are going to pass along to our children. Some of us wonder whether we are going to be able to be as good for our children as our parents were for us. The good news is that we don't have to pass along a legacy of parental inadequacy.

The God of the Bible has offered to adopt, raise, and live His life through you if you will allow Him to parent you. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ has offered to adopt and name you in His eternal inheritance if you will acknowledge your sins and trust Christ for forgiveness and life (Eph. 1:3-12; 1 Jn. 5:1).

In this new relationship to God, a parent can find a love, a security, and a confidence that God alone can give. It begins as we trust Christ as Savior from sin's eternal penalty. It continues as we rely on Him for wisdom and enablement.

This is the only way that "children having children" really works in our favor. When we trust God and live as His children, He will develop within us the character that is the secret of good parenting.