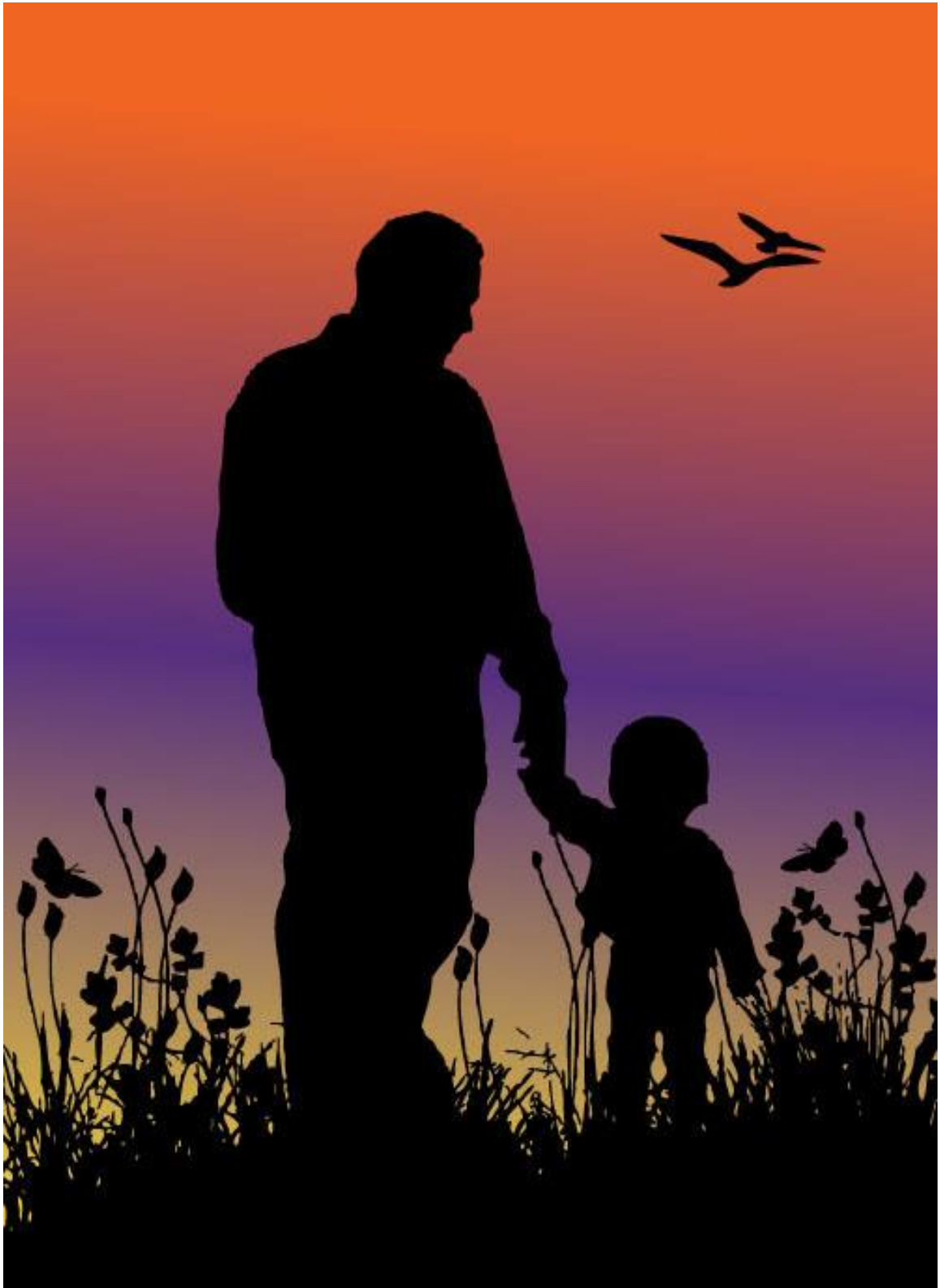


Where are You, Father?



Bev van Rensburg

Father's Love Letter

My Child,

You may not know me, but I know everything about you.

Psalm 139:1

I know when you sit down and when you rise up.

Psalm 139:2

I am familiar with all your ways.

Psalm 139:3

Even the very hairs on your head are numbered.

Matthew 10:29–31

For you were made in my image.

Genesis 1:27

In me you live and move and have your being.

For you are my offspring.

Acts 17:28

I knew you even before you were conceived.

Jeremiah 1:4–5

I chose you when I planned creation.

Ephesians 1:11–12

You were not a mistake,
for all your days are written in my book.

Psalm 139:15–16

I determined the exact time of your birth
and where you would live.

Acts 17:26

You are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Psalm 139:14

I knit you together in your mother's womb.

Psalm 139:13

And brought you forth on the day you were born.

Psalm 71:6

I have been misrepresented
by those who don't know me.

John 8:41–44

I am not distant and angry,
but am the complete expression of love.
1 John 4:16

And it is my desire to lavish my love on you.
Simply because you are my child
and I am your Father.
1 John 3:1

I offer you more than your earthly father ever could.
Matthew 7:11

For I am the perfect father.
Matthew 5:48

Every good gift that you receive comes from my hand.
James 1:17

For I am your provider and I meet all your needs.
Matthew 6:31–33

My plan for your future has always been filled with hope.
Jeremiah 29:11

Because I love you with an everlasting love.
Jeremiah 31:3

My thoughts toward you are countless
as the sand on the seashore.
Psalms 139:17–18

And I rejoice over you with singing.
Zephaniah 3:17

I will never stop doing good to you.
Jeremiah 32:40

For you are my treasured possession.
Exodus 19:5

I desire to establish you
with all my heart and all my soul.
Jeremiah 32:41

And I want to show you great and marvellous things.
Jeremiah 33:3

If you seek me with all your heart, you will find me.
Deuteronomy 4:29

Delight in me and I will give you
the desires of your heart.
Psalm 37:4

For it is I who gave you those desires.
Philippians 2:13

I am able to do more for you
than you could possibly imagine.
Ephesians 3:20

For I am your greatest encourager.
2 Thessalonians 2:16–17

I am also the Father who comforts you
in all your troubles.
2 Corinthians 1:3–4

When you are broken-hearted, I am close to you.
Psalm 34:18

As a shepherd carries a lamb,
I have carried you close to my heart.
Isaiah 40:11

One day I will wipe away every tear from your eyes.
Revelation 21:3–4

And I'll take away all the pain you have suffered on this earth.
Revelation 21:3–4

I am your Father, and I love you
even as I love my son, Jesus.
John 17:23

For in Jesus, my love for you is revealed.
John 17:26

He is the exact representation of my being.
Hebrews 1:3

He came to demonstrate that I am for you,
not against you.
Romans 8:31

And to tell you that I am not counting your sins.
Jesus died so that you and I could be reconciled.
2 Corinthians 5:18–19

His death was the ultimate expression
of my love for you.
1 John 4:10

I gave up everything I loved that I might gain your love.
Romans 8:31–32

If you receive the gift of my son Jesus,
you receive me.
1 John 2:23

And nothing will ever separate you from my love again.
Romans 8:38–39

Come home and I'll throw the biggest party
heaven has ever seen.
Luke 15:7

I have always been Father, and will always be Father.
Ephesians 3:14–15

My question is...Will you be my child?
John 1:12–13

I am waiting for you.
Luke 15:11–32

**Love, Your Dad
Almighty God¹**

Preface

Where are godly nurturing fathers today? There is also a lack of nurture from mothers, but the fathers have a special role of heading up households, imparting values and knowledge and identity to their children....and how many parents are intentionally teaching the ways of God and modelling them themselves?

In an MTh thesis I completed in 2013 titled *Children in Crisis: Imperatives and Strategies for the Church in South Africa*, I discovered that abuse and neglect were major causes of crisis. The lack of a strong father figure in the home, and intentional teaching of the biblical values which are given in love, especially on sexual purity, is not giving strong roots to children and youth. They are supposed to become mature adults who know right from wrong and live lives of integrity...and hopefully, develop a deep love for the Lord and His Word. Instead, children and teens are not learning to fly out of the nest into the world with strong wings—they often have broken wings! May this book help us to see the wonderful God we have, and the incredible fact that we are made in His image to worship Him and reflect who He is!

This book is dedicated to God—May it bring honour to Him and bring the Father-heart of God into many homes.

Secondly, this book is a testimony to the joy of having a godly husband who loves God and his family and depends on Him for strength and direction....What a blessing to have a strong father in the home—one who reflects Father-God to his family. We appreciate you—husband, father, and grandfather, Reuben!

Bev, Ryan, Darren, Kerry (and husband, Byron and child, Luke).

Dear Reader

If you are not experiencing the love, the teaching and the direction God wants you to receive in your home...may this book help you onto the right road.

You can begin a godly heritage for the future. The help and support of godly mentors who value God's Word, are Christ-centred, and live lives led by the Holy-Spirit, and by attending a God-glorifying church, you can be supported as you look to invite the Heavenly Father to be the head of your home!

Together in the shadow of the Almighty (Psalm 91)

Bev

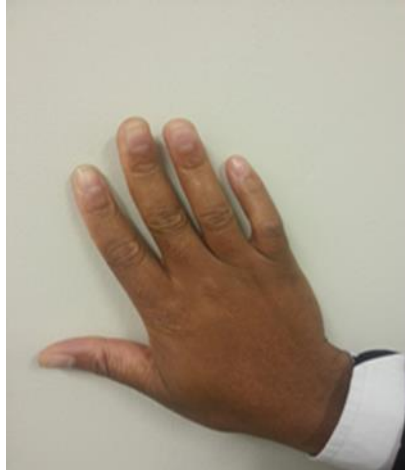
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1. Introduction

Look at your hand...Imagine you are the centre, and the fingers are five people very close to you—like relatives or friends. For some it will be a father or a friend, for others a sister or a teacher.



We all have special people in our lives, connected like the fingers to your hand. You feel that you cannot live without them. God wanted families to be like that—that each child should have a father and a mother, a brother and a sister, grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts. He meant us to grow up in a loving family, receiving food and a place to stay, guidance and discipline, preparing us for the day when we step out of family into the big world.

Sadly many of us do not have close family—we grow up with other relatives or even strangers caring for us. We may have family, but for some reason are separated from them. We may also not even have close family, because one or both of our parents have died or because we have never known them. This is the case for an orphan—one permanently separated from real family.²

Are you an orphan? Have you lost a Mom or a Dad?

Are you living with a single parent...or another relative?

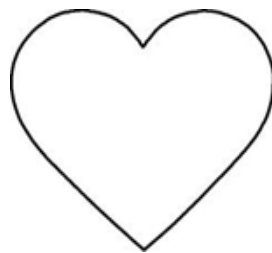
Do you feel as if you are an orphan—with a father or mother you hardly know?

Are you missing a deep relationship, especially with a Dad?

Have you ever been abused, emotionally, physically, sexually—do you battle to understand that there can be a loving Heavenly Father?



If you have never understood that God really loves you and wants a relationship with you, this little book, aims to show you that He really does love you. If you have never known a Dad or Mom that you know you can trust completely, and that will love you and support you through life, look at the qualities of the Father-heart of God. See God's heart for you, with new eyes. He can be your role model as a parent one day!



Let us think about how some of Father-God's qualities can reflect in the home, whether you have your birth parents or carers. How does God want a father to care for his wife and family? How does God want a mother to care for the family? How does He want you, to live in your home?

My prayer is that you would welcome Father-God and His Son, Jesus (who shows his Father's nature), into your life, and that you would believe that He truly loves you—enough to have made His life a gift to you in forgiveness and in sending the Holy Spirit to help you through life, while He is busy in heaven praying to his Father (interceding) for His children on earth!



Imagine if your father at home could show more of the qualities of God, the heavenly Father...many of the qualities like strength, protection, teaching, providing for you.



Imagine if your mother could also be more like God in showing love and care.



What is your family like?...both parents, siblings at home, single parent/carer?
Adoption, fostering....? Is this more like your life experience?

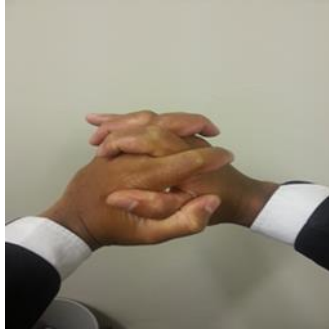


2. The Father-Heart of God

Here are some wonderful qualities of God...how special to have them shine out in your home!³

2.1. Exercise: Tick under the person's name if you experience any of these qualities in their lives as humans (for example 'healer'- giving medicine and help when a family member is sick). Last column: Do you show these qualities to your family? If you are an adult, substitute some headings: Husband/ Wife (for carer), Son (for brother), Daughter (for sister). Last column: Do you show these qualities to your family?

Father-God	Father	Mother	Carer	Brother	Sister	Me
Love (1 John 4:16)						
Righteous (Psalm 5:8)						
Deliverer (Psalm 70:5)						
My Strength (Psalm 43:2)						
My Shelter (Joel 3:16)						
Friend (John 15:15); Hope (Psalm 71:5)						
Advocate (standing up for someone) (1 John 2:1)						
Restorer (Psalm 23:3) Comforter (Romans 15:5)						
Healer (Exodus 15:26; Psalm 103:3)						
Redeemer (rescuer) (Isaiah 59:20)						
Stronghold, (Nahum 1:7), and Hiding place (Psalm 32:7) Lord of Peace (2 Thessalonians 3:16)						
Provider (Genesis 22:14)						
Spirit of Truth (John 16:13)						
Helper (Hebrews 13:6), Counsellor (Isaiah 9:6))						



Clasped hands are so much stronger than one hand by itself (just you and the ones you love). So it is if you invite God to come into your home to be a special part of your family. Imagine your hand being clasped by another Hand which holds and supports your hand. This is how God wants to be in your home:

Thumb—laid over yours and pulling you up (God).

Index finger—being trained in the way you should go—the 10 Commandments, constantly thinking and talking about the Lord (Deuteronomy 6), and Psalm 78, which is about telling the next generation about what God has done.

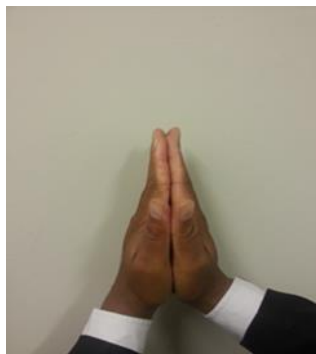
Middle finger—we cannot follow God without His help. We sin, and need to be saved by Jesus who died on the cross for us. He made us blameless and He forgives us when we ask Him into our hearts and lives, and are truly sorry for our sin. What a difference—being a Christian in the home!

Fourth finger—we need to grow more and more like Jesus through prayer, reading the Bible, hearing the preaching and teaching of the Bible, and spending quality time with other Christians in church and cell groups, witnessing—joy of Jesus and friends.

Little finger—the wonderful strong closing of your hands together—the best part of the story of a close walk with Jesus is going to heaven to be with Jesus for ever!

If you lift your fingers out of the clasp position you will find that they look like praying hands—what a wonderful reminder to pray!

Jesus says. 'Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!' (Matthew 26:41).



2.2 Let us look at some of God's qualities

2.2.1 The Father's love is the reason for Him sending His Son, Jesus, to rescue you from a wicked, evil world and to be His dearly loved child. 'For God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16). God the Father shows His qualities in Jesus, His beloved Son...so how about Jesus being the role model in your home? Jesus said 'I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by Himself. He does only what He sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does' (John 5:19). Fathers, mothers and children would come a long way towards building successful families if we allowed Jesus to be our role model!

Jesus calls His Father 'Abba', which means Daddy (Mark 14:36). Can you call Father-God Abba? He loves you and wants to be your Daddy.

How do we know that the Father loves us? He sent Jesus to earth to live a tough life, teaching us and showing us miracles, giving His life for us on the cross....and He is living today (see Romans 8 and Hebrews 4).

2.2.2 This is what John the Baptist said about Jesus

For He is sent by God. He speaks God's words, for God gives Him the Spirit without limit. The Father loves His Son and has put everything into His hands. And anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment (John 3:34–36).

2.2.3 This is what Jesus said about himself in a prayer to His Father



Father, I want these whom you have given me to be with Me where I am. Then they can see all the glory you gave Me because You loved Me even before the world began! "O righteous Father, the world doesn't know you, but I do; and these

disciples know You sent Me. I have revealed you to them, and I will continue to do so. Then your love for me will be in them, and I will be in them" (John 17:24–26).

2.2.4 Psalm 103: Some special qualities of Father-God

He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases. He redeems me from death and crowns me with love and tender mercies. He fills my life with good things. My youth is renewed like the eagle's! The LORD gives righteousness and justice to all who are treated unfairly. He revealed His character to Moses and His deeds to the people of Israel (Psalm 103:3–7).

The LORD is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He does not punish us for all our sins; He does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve. For His unfailing love toward those who fear Him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. The LORD is like a father to His children, tender and compassionate to those who fear Him. He knows how weak we are; He remembers we are only dust (Psalm 103:8–14).

2.2.5 Father-God will not forsake His child

Sometimes parents may abandon their children or sometimes they say they will only show them love if their children are well-behaved. A desperate prayer to God is seen in this plea: 'Do not turn your back on me. Do not reject your servant in anger. You have always been my helper. Don't leave me now; don't abandon me, O God of my salvation! Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will hold me close (Psalm 27:9–10).

2.2.6 Is God really the protector?

Here are special promises from God:

Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; He is my God, and I trust Him. For He will rescue you from every trap and protect you from deadly disease. He will cover you with His feathers. He will shelter you with His wings. His faithful promises are your armour and protection. Do not be afraid of the terrors of the night, nor the arrow that flies in the day (Psalm 91:1–5).

The LORD says, "I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name. When they call on Me, I will answer; I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue and honour them. I will reward them with a long life and give them my salvation" (Psalm 91:14–16).

2.2.7 Is God really the provider?

Jesus said

So don't worry about these things, saying, "What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?" These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need. "So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matthew 6:31–34).

2.2.8 Is God really our helper?

God answers our calls for help (He will help carers or parents and children as they ask him for help). God promises us, 'So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him' (Matthew 7:11).

2.2.9 Does God really know all about your times of suffering?

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before His eyes, and He is the One to whom we are accountable. So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same testing we do, yet He did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive His mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most (Hebrews 4:13–16).

2.2.10 God is our Creator

He made man and women in his image (Genesis 1: 26–27). God gave us special abilities. He does not make mistakes...so know that you are special! God has also given us creativity so let us encourage one another to use those talents and intelligence He has given us. He also put us in charge of looking after His creation, animals and plants.

God wants us to love Him with all our heart, but also our neighbour as ourselves. So He wants us to love Him and other people as well! When a teacher of the Law asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was, He said:

'You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37–40).

Don't you care for yourself? Don't you want to be treated with respect and care? Treat others with that respect, putting their interests in front of your own. Don't we, as God's special creation deserve to be treated well? He treats us well...treat others well. Honour your parents...even if you think they do not deserve it. Think of Jesus' attitude. Here is a wonderful passage of Scripture—He is the greatest role model!

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from His love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts

tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though He was God, He did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, He gave up His divine privileges; He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When He appeared in human form, He humbled Himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross (Philippians 2:1–8).

2.2.11 He is our teacher

God gave us the 10 Commandments. The first few are about loving God (worship only Him, do not make idols or worship them, don't use God's Name for evil purposes, and keep the Sabbath Day holy). The rest of the commandments are really about loving and respecting other people:

For the commandments say, "You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet." These—and other such commandments—are summed up in this one commandment: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfils the requirements of God's law (Romans 13:9–10).

God is our teacher and wants parents to teach their children His ways, in what they say and in their lifestyle (especially in Deuteronomy 6:5–9). Then they will be blessed and when their children are old they will not forget what they have been taught (Proverbs 22:11)...otherwise the next generation can be lost (Psalm 78). God wants all to hear about His salvation—He does not want any to perish—including children (2 Peter 3:9).

We and our children need to know that we are made in God's image and that He has entrusted us to care for His creation as good stewards—this includes other human

beings as part of His creation: 'Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?' (Malachi 2:10). The Father would want us to show respect and care for others who deserve to feel dignified. For this reason, we should oppose anything which would break down God's giving of life and respect...such as abortion, legalising prostitution, and allowing TV pornography.

David was so close to God but sinned, as do we. He came broken-hearted to God—really sorry for his sin and said: 'Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of Your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins. Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin. For I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night. Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. You will be proved right in what you say, and your judgment against me is just' (Psalm 51:1–4).

In this Psalm of David we can see how precious we are to God:

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvellous—how well I know it. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed. How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered! I can't even count them; they outnumber the grains of sand! And when I wake up, you are still with me! (Psalm 139:13–18).

3. Reflecting God's qualities in the home

3.1 About the family: Moms, Dads and carers in the home and the children who depend on them for care



3.1.1 When talking about the qualities God places in a mother, He says 'Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you! (Isaiah 49:15).

3.1.2 When talking about a father, God gave him leadership over his family—over his wife and children—he is accountable to God!

You will see from these Scriptures that the relationship is one of love and respect.

For a husband is the head of His wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Saviour of His body, the church. As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything. For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up His life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to Himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself. No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church. And we are members of his body. As the Scriptures say, 'A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.' This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. So again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband (Ephesians 5:22–33).

3.1.3 Children and parents

Children, obey your parents because you belong to the Lord, for this is the right thing to do. 'Honour your father and mother.' This is the first commandment with a promise: If you honour your father and mother, 'things will go well for you, and you will have a long life on the earth.' Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord (Ephesians 6:1–4).

3.1.4 Is it tough at home?

If you have asked Jesus into your heart as your Saviour, and know He is there by the Holy Spirit living in you and giving you joy, teaching and guiding you, you will be so

pleased to know that Jesus is praying for you—interceding for you in heaven to the Father—how amazing and wonderful is that?

And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, He will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you. Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do (Romans 8:8–10)...And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them (Romans 8:26–28).

3.2 What we need to see happen in the home

3.2.1 Family love and care



Titus 2 gives us instruction on our behaviour:

Teach the older men to exercise self-control, to be worthy of respect, and to live wisely. They must have sound faith and be filled with love and patience. Similarly, teach the older women to live in a way that honours God. They must not slander others or be heavy drinkers. Instead, they should teach others what is good. These older women must train the younger women to love their husbands and their children, to live wisely and be pure, to work in their homes, to do good, and to be submissive to their husbands. Then they will not bring shame on the word of God. In the same way, encourage the young men to live wisely (Titus 2:2–6).

When do we tell our family that we love them, when do we make them feel appreciated and give quality time to them? God's Word is full of the message of His love for us and this love should make us want to love others (2 Corinthians 5:14)—and not only in word, but in action (1 John 3:18). Parental love, in a small way, shows God's love for His spiritual children (Deuteronomy 23:5) and those who believe in Christ become sons whom He loves (1 John 3:1)⁴.

A strange thing...some parents today do not seem to enjoy their children—abandoning them, not providing for them. Even the wealthy sometimes give material goods instead of love, leaving children feeling empty. Many children and young people today have everything to live with, but nothing to live for.⁵

Children need to be loved by their parents. That's the way God deals with us. 'For the Father Himself loves you dearly because you love me and believe that I came from God' (John 16:27). 'Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God' (1 John 4:7).

3.2.2 We need to provide for our children



Paul says that if a parent does not provide for his family he is worse than an unbeliever. Our heavenly Father gives the right things to His children. 'But those who won't care for their relatives, especially those in their own household, have denied the true faith. Such people are worse than unbelievers' (1 Timothy 5:8).

3.2.3 The salvation of children

If a parent can give their child an opportunity to hear the 'Good News' that Jesus Christ can be their Saviour, and even lead their child to Christ, praying with them to receive Jesus into their heart and life—this is the best gift they can possibly give (but not force it—only the Holy Spirit can give the child the desire to commit himself to Christ). A child can make a clear commitment to the Lord at an early age and with full understanding—of God's love, his own sin, God's forgiveness and willingness to be personal Lord and Saviour, Jesus death on the cross and His resurrection ... knowing the Holy Spirit living in him, giving him power to live a life that pleases Jesus.



Even a young child can bring others to the Lord—telling others that God has made their whole lives change to grow more like Him. The Bible says:

Since we believe human testimony, surely we can believe the greater testimony that comes from God. And God has testified about His Son. All who believe in the Son of God know in their hearts that this testimony is true. Those who don't believe this are actually calling God a liar because they don't believe what God has testified about His Son. And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life. I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life. And we are confident that He hears us whenever we ask for anything that pleases Him (1 John 5:9–14).

How wonderful is it for a child who has been abused and neglected, to find a personal relationship with Abba Father. A child can receive the same help from the Holy Spirit as an adult—shown his sin, shown the truth and given comfort. Jesus said ‘And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth’ (John 14:16).

The Bible tells us how concerned God is for orphans and hurting children:

‘Give justice to the poor and the orphan; uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute. Rescue the poor and helpless; deliver them from the grasp of evil people. Defend the rights of the poor and the orphans; be fair to the needy and the helpless. Rescue them from the power of evil people’ (Psalm 82:3–4).

3.2.4 We need to bring up our children in the ways of the Lord

God tells parents how he wants them to bring up their children in the ways of the Lord.

...the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4b–9).

‘The day is coming,’ says the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife,’ says the LORD. ‘But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day,’ says the LORD. ‘I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write

them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts' (Jeremiah 31:31–33).



Reminders of the covenant God made (to bless the people if they live according to His ways), should happen all the time in the home. Parents or carers could help in this by giving Bibles and devotionals and other reminders to their children, for example, Gospel music, and Scripture texts...even as memory verses... and take them to Sunday School, Holiday Bible Clubs and children's and teenagers' camps (for example Scripture Union and SCA).

What about parents who tell you to do the right things and then do the wrong things themselves—hypocrites—almost as if saying ‘Do as I say, not as I do’. Do you want your children to love, obey, trust, and follow the Lord? Then you must do the same. If you do not have family role models, what about asking godly people in the church to be mentors, and of course, we have the Bible itself—the Word of God. Boys and girls seldom live up to standards they do not see in their fathers and mothers or carers. Paul said this to Timothy

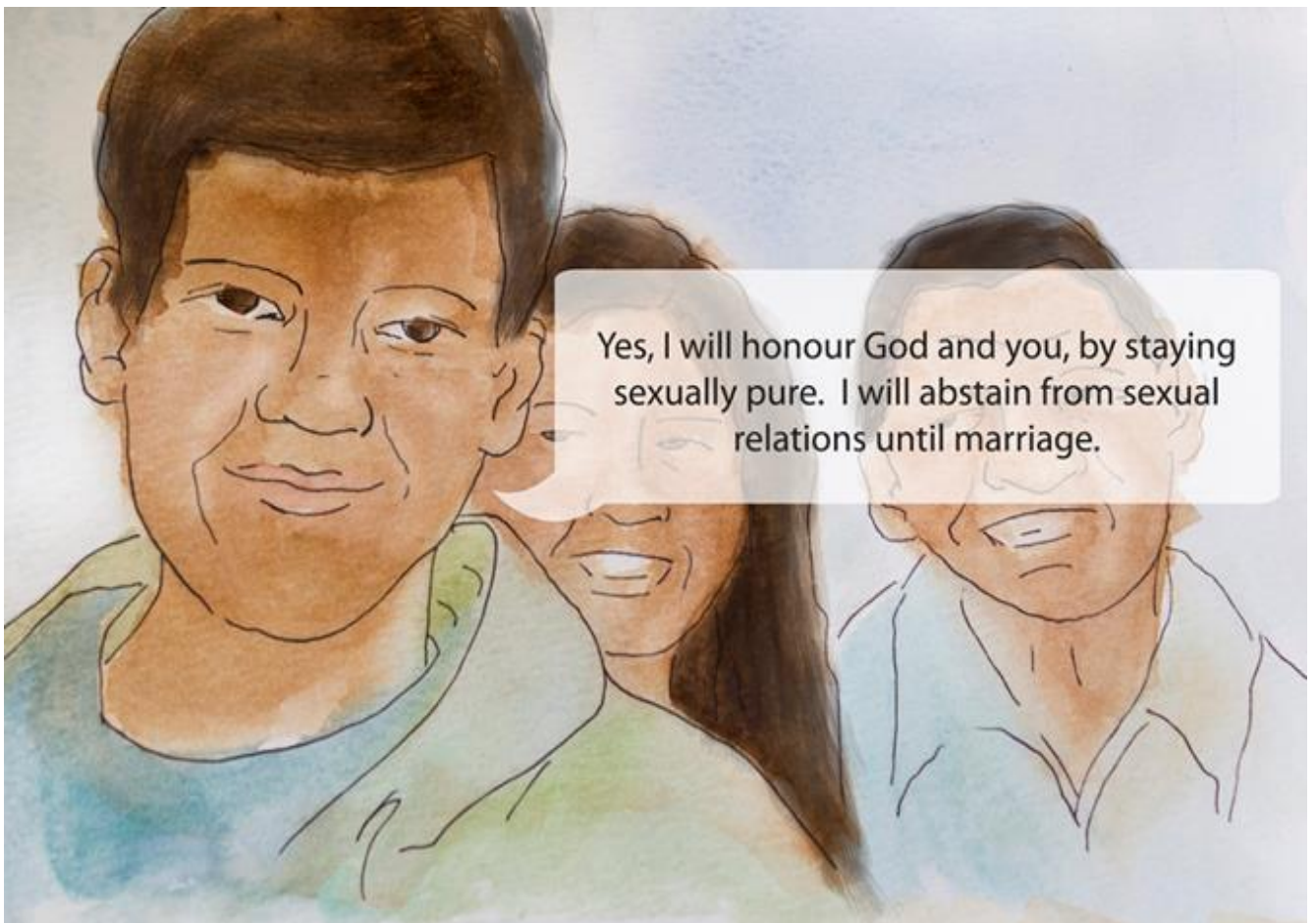
But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you. You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip His people to do every good work (2 Timothy 3:14–17).

3.2.5 Parents need to tell and apply Bible stories



Parents need to share Bible stories and how they show God’s work in people’s lives.

O my people, listen to my instructions. Open your ears to what I am saying, for I will speak to you in a parable. I will teach you hidden lessons from our past—stories we have heard and known, stories our ancestors handed down to us. We will not hide these truths from our children; we will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the LORD, about His power and His mighty wonders. For He issued His laws to Jacob; He gave His instructions to Israel. He commanded our ancestors to teach them to their children, so the next generation might know them—even the children not yet born—and they in turn will teach their own children. So each generation should set its hope anew on God, not forgetting His glorious miracles and obeying His commands. Then they will not be like their ancestors—stubborn, rebellious, and unfaithful, refusing to give their hearts to God (Psalm 78:1–8).



Children obeying parents—teenage son and daughter saying to dad and mom that they would honour God and them by staying sexually pure as they requested.

3.2.6 Worship

The Bible shows that children were included together with the whole family for worship and in celebrations and in the reading of the Word. They went with their parents to church. In Exodus 12 we can see that children were expected to ask the meaning of the Passover. The whole family worshipped the Lord. Children were part of the crowd listening when Joshua renewed the covenant vows to God. When Samuel was a little boy serving in the temple, God called him three times by name. Samuel asked Eli, the priest, what he wanted, thinking that he had called him. Eli told him to go back to bed...but when it happened for the third time Eli realised that God was calling Samuel. He told Samuel to say, 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.' This shows that a young child was trusted by God to pass on an important message. Samuel had the courage to tell Eli exactly what God wanted him to say—even though it was bad news about Eli, who had not stopped his sons from being 'evil priests'.

An amazing verse showing children as worshippers is found in Psalm 8:2: 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies to silence the foe and the avenger.'

Children are ordained and designed to praise God and His glory. They are not consumers or future adults, but worshippers of the Creator God. Their ears, eyes, feet, hands and voices have been created to praise God. This is their true nature and purpose. But more than this they have a special role in silencing the enemies of God. When all else fails, it is children (like Samuel and David, for example) who will be the means of moral and spiritual virtue and power. Isn't this remarkable?⁶

God wants our worship. He is not just referring to adults when He speaks about keeping the Sabbath and wanting quality worship—the best music, expertly played: 'Sing to him a new song; play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts' (Psalm 33:3). Children were taught to play musical instruments. David played his lyre for Saul when he was still a young man—not long after he had killed Goliath (1 Samuel 19). Worship was important for the whole family, for example, in keeping the Sabbath. Often these days, parents and society set a bad example for the children by often treating the Sabbath as an ordinary day for personal pleasures, in direct

disobedience to Isaiah 58:13 and 14. Isaiah 58:13 reads, 'If you stop trampling on the day of worship and doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the day of worship a delight and the LORD'S holy day honourable, if you honour it by not going your own way, by not going out when you want, and by not talking idly, then you will find joy in the LORD.'

3.2.7 We must apply godly discipline to our children



God the Father loves us, but He is also holy so He will not allow sin in His presence. Because of that fact, He disciplines His children so that they can be directed to live a holy life. If parents do not apply discipline in their children's lives they can expect the children to grow up without understanding the importance of boundaries and of good controlled behaviour. God disciplines those He loves and He expects the same of our fathers.

There are many Scriptures in Proverbs telling our parents how to discipline children. 'My child, don't reject the LORD's discipline, and don't be upset when He corrects you. For the LORD corrects those He loves, just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights' (Proverbs 3:11–12). The child needs to understand that a father's discipline is for his own good. Just as God is loving, but also holy and just, parents must be loving and also intolerant of sin and injustice, and this implies the need to apply discipline and giving boundaries.

'Discipline your children while there is hope. Otherwise you will ruin their lives' (Proverbs 19:18). Again, these qualities need to be intentionally taught to parents and to train within and without the church for the sake of the children.

'Don't fail to discipline your children. They won't die if you spank them' (Proverbs 23:13). We are sometimes concerned about hurting our children with a spanking, whereas we should rather think ahead about the long-term effect of not solving a problem at the beginning—before it gets out of hand.

'To discipline a child produces wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by an undisciplined child' (Proverbs 29:15). If we do not discipline a child when he is young, when he is older it is much more difficult to discipline him. He will not take his parents seriously if he is not taught these principles early in his life.

'Discipline your children, and they will give you peace of mind and will make your heart glad' (Proverbs 29:17). If well-disciplined when a child is young he is likely to be disciplined in nature and less likely to be rebellious or difficult when older.

According to an increasing number of sociologists and psychologists, many problems in child behaviour stem from letting children have unrestricted freedom. Undisciplined children become maladjusted children. Allowed to do what they please, children soon have no respect for authority, insist on having their own way and become uncontrollable. To fail to direct and discipline children, to raise them in an atmosphere of unbridled permissiveness contributes to their rebellious behaviour. No wonder our children are in trouble⁷.

If a naughty child is disciplined for doing something wrong, he learns what is right. This also gives him a sense of security. It is good to know boundaries—especially at

home. If we explain what is right and expected of children and what will happen if they do wrong, namely a reasonable teaching punishment not given in anger and not without reasons, we are following what God wants. If we do not do it when the child is young, we can expect trouble when he is older. This discipline is for the benefit of the child, and is actually protecting him from future harm. 'Those who spare the rod of discipline hate their children. Those who love their children care enough to discipline them' (Proverbs 13:24).

Many parents do not apply enough discipline and others actually hurt their children excessively with the rod, in anger—this can be called physical abuse!

If you listen to constructive criticism, you will be at home among the wise' (Proverbs 15:31)—a child who accepts this discipline is wise. We should not be discouraged when God disciplines us—He is disciplining us as sons (Hebrews 12:5–8).

Let us think about how fathers can make their children angry—how does this happen in these days? 'Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord' (Ephesians 6:4):

1. By over-protection—a child can lose confidence and can get angry when he sees the extra freedom other children are given.
2. By favouritism—a parent has a favourite child and shows it! Isaac favoured Esau above Jacob, and Rebekah preferred Jacob above Esau (Genesis 25:28). This really hurts children!
3. By discouragement—a child comes to a parent to share a dream about 'what she wants to be when she grows up and the parent says: 'You might as well forget about that—that will never happen!'
4. By not allowing the child to follow his potential—trying to live out the parents' dreams for the child. The child has a right to have his own ideas, and does not need to be just like his parent to be a success.
5. By neglect—David and his son Absalom's quarrel in 2 Samuel 14:13,28, may be partly due to the fact that David neglected him.
6. By bitter words and actual physical abuse—where a father continually reprimands his children and inflicts severe physical punishment (to little or even adult children), almost out of habit.

When God warns us about wrong behaviour, about His discipline and punishment for wrong-doing (Hebrews 12), it is unpleasant at the time, but afterwards we appreciate it and it produces excellent fruit (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:32; 2 Corinthians 6:9; 2 Timothy 2:25 and 3:16 where this ‘discipline’ is the ‘training in righteousness’). Training, rules and regulations, rewards, and when necessary, punishments are part of discipline and are important in the bringing up of a child. Christian training includes being a role model showing the presence of Jesus in one’s life.⁸

‘The LORD passed in front of Moses, calling out, "Yahweh! The LORD! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness’ (Exodus 34:6). God disciplines us in love, for our good. We need to have the same attitude.

Here is a really sad Scripture: ‘I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations.’ (Exodus 34:7). Let us be certain not to carry over bad habits to our families (alcohol, abuse, divorce, sexual immorality...so often repeated in following generations). Be the start of a new godly generation!

3.2.8 We need to comfort our children



Here is a special word picture of a loving parent who carries his son: ‘and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the LORD your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place.’ (Deuteronomy 1:31). Children need to be protected and comforted—a father has a wonderful calming effect on his children and he needs to show compassion to his child. A child appreciates being picked up by his dad or mom. This is important. Physical touch, for example giving hugs, is very important for fathers to show their children. In the case of children who do not experience the comfort of their own father’s hug, the spiritual father-figures in the church can show this kind of comfort.⁹

Here are some Scriptures concerning comfort from the Lord:

- ‘In that day you will sing: “I will praise You, O LORD! You were angry with me, but not anymore. Now you comfort me” (Isaiah 12:1).
- ‘I will comfort you there in Jerusalem as a mother comforts her child. “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13).
- ‘All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us’ (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).
- ‘But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—He will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid” (John 14:26–27).

3.2.9 Reconciliation

Parents should discipline their children, but they need to show unconditional love by their willingness to forgive and to ‘move on’ from the problem, just as Father-God shows His love for us. They should forgive and not keep reminding the child of the problem.

God does a work of reconciliation between fathers and children:

I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers (Malachi 4:5).

God forgives and forgets. Humans are inclined to remember and to hold grudges. Fathers and children need to be reconciled and this was a major task of Jesus, our Messiah.

For God in all His fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through Him God reconciled everything to Himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:19–20).

3.2.10 What do you do if there is a lack of fatherly care?

In Bible times fathers generally did not neglect or abandon their children. Extended family usually helped in family care. The family was usually stable because of the leadership of the father. One of the reasons for immoral behaviour and 'spiritual sickness' is the absence of strong fatherly leadership.

Hurting children are often depressed and have a low self-image. They need to be encouraged. "Encourage each other" (1 Thessalonians 4:18) and "build each other up" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). We have to do much in undoing the damage inflicted on young children by ungodly home influences. It is important to be a role model Christian family for children from dysfunctional families, for them to see God's love in reality in a loving Christian family—this gives them hope for the future. Children are often destitute because fathers are deserting their roles and so need to return to the biblical patterns of loving and leading the family.¹⁰

An abusive neglectful father can really only have a new approach to his children when God changes his heart and gives him a new attitude towards his children. We cannot become better people just by our own willpower. The Holy Spirit can convict of sin and give a spirit of remorse, bringing about the desire to ask God for forgiveness and a desire to change their ways and to start to care for their children.

The church must find ways to help all children by supporting primary care-givers in the sacred task of parenting and by ensuring that all children find the love and care they need¹¹.

Children are really important to God and He wants them to receive care in a family situation. They are a gift from God, as a sign of His love (Deuteronomy 7:13; Psalm 127:3). Parents receive special blessings through their children (Numbers 5:28; Deuteronomy 28:4 and 11; Lamentations 24–25). The question that comes to mind is, “How many parents are emotionally as well as physically absent from their children, and miss out on these blessings?” Children are valuable to God and He asks us to protect them (1 Samuel 20:42 and Ezra 8:21)¹².

Other than leadership, Parents should also pray for their children. David prayed for Solomon, “Give my son, Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, requirements and decrees” (1 Chronicles 29:19). He refers to dedication of children to the Lord; even Jesus was ‘presented to the Lord’ (Luke 2:22).¹³

The Proverbs 31 woman is an ideal example of a wonderful parent. ‘When she speaks, her words are wise, and she gives instructions with kindness. She carefully watches everything in her household and suffers nothing from laziness’ (Proverbs 31:26–27).

Godly women, when training other women, should also teach them to show hospitality. The Christian household should extend hospitality, and in so doing, show God’s love for the outsider (Titus 2:3–5).

3.2.11 Mentorship and discipleship

It is not an option to train others in the ways of the Lord. As Christians we should all love and shepherd others as unto the Lord (not as if we are better than them, but as fellow sinners saved by God’s grace, encouraging one another to become more like Jesus Christ). Even godly teenagers and young adults should be there for younger people—God enables!

MENTORS

Qualities in a mentor (acrostic)

ME—right with Christ—**M**otivating and **E**ncouraging others in the Lord;

N—**N**ourished by God's Word;

T—a **T**eachable, humble spirit;

O—**O**pen to the leading of the Holy Spirit—**O**bedient to Him, admitting weaknesses;

R—**R**eliable—keeping confidences and being reliant on God;

S—**S**upplication, **S**acrificial, **S**erving as unto the Lord—**S**elflessly.¹⁴

Bible Study discipleship and accountability group: growing in the ways of the Lord—'iron sharpens iron' (Proverbs 27:17).



Do you have a godly mentor outside of the family—a friend and support? Psalm 78 tells us about godly nurture from generation to generation! Paul said to Timothy 'I remember your genuine faith, for you share the faith that first filled your grandmother Lois and your mother, Eunice. And I know that same faith continues strong in you' (2 Timothy 1:5).

The teaching he received from the Word in the home went hand-in-hand with the regular spiritual teaching in the synagogue, where he was exposed to the biblical scholars of the time and then he was mentored by Paul.

Paul talked about his close relationship with Timothy, his knowledge of tears shed in his life, showing his close personal relationship with him. He wrote to Timothy explaining that he was appointed to preach the gospel. He said to him

And God chose me to be a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of this Good News. That is why I am suffering here in prison. But I am not ashamed of it, for I know the One in whom I trust, and I am sure that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until the day of His return. Hold on to the pattern of wholesome teaching you learned from me—a pattern shaped by the faith and love that you have in Christ Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within us, carefully guard the precious truth that has been entrusted to you (2 Timothy 1:11–14).

Paul gave very important advice to Timothy for his future:

But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you. You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip His people to do every good work (2 Timothy 3:14–17).

3.2.12 Warnings against false teaching

Paul's warns Timothy about the false teaching of the time in 2 Timothy 3:14–15, not to be led astray by these impostors. Instead, he is to continue in what he had learned and had 'become convinced of'. We need to return to 100 per cent acceptance of the trust-worthiness of Scripture, and to trust Jesus when He says that He is the Way

and the Truth and the Life and that no-one can come to the Father except through Him (John14:6).

As we consider the believer being equipped for service of the Lord it naturally leads us to thoughts of the great Helper, the Holy Spirit who will help those who are believers, living under His direction. Jesus promised to His disciples:

When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on His own but will tell you what He has heard. He will tell you about the future. He will bring me glory by telling you whatever He receives from me. All that belongs to the Father is mine; this is why I said, 'The Spirit will tell you whatever He receives from me' (John16:13–15).

The fact that the Holy Spirit will help the believer to remember what he has been taught is something for which Christians are grateful: 'But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—He will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you' (John 14:26). The reminder is the fact that if a child is trained from an early age, when he is old he shall not depart from what he is taught (Proverbs 22:6) and particularly if the child has received salvation and has received godly nurture, there is much hope for him as an adult. And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue His work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns (Philippians 1:6).

3.2.13 Advocacy of children

Let us help one another and stand in the gap in prayer for the hurting children and teenagers. Call on God and His godly believers to help those who are being hurt. There will be times when outside protection is needed for the abused child, even police protection if the child's safety is at risk. The pastor and elders may be needed to intervene at times. Christians need to fight for the preservation of human dignity from a biblical perspective, promoting the knowledge of God creating man in His own image for His glory. This would directly affect abused and neglected children if taken to heart.

Part of the provision a father can give his children is also to teach survival skills; this holistic approach is important. Education should be spiritual, as well as in equipping children with the skills and creativity to earn an income for their food and other provisions one day. In Bible times families learned to use implements such as stone plough-shares and flint sickles, plant crops, dig irrigation ditches, and to farm sheep and cattle.¹⁵

4. Comments from Floyd Mc Clung (author of *The Father-Heart of God*)

4.1. Introduction

Floyd McClung, in his wonderful book *The Father-Heart of God*, describes seeing teen drug addicts in Afghanistan, whose parents denied God, moral absolutes, and the importance of the family. As a result, they felt rejected and were emotionally scarred. Many of these hurting youth had to be counselled, and common to all was a lack of love and Christian nurture in their upbringing.¹⁶

McClung says that one of the most wonderful revelations in the Bible is that God is our Father. He asks us, ‘But what do you think of when you hear the word *father*? Do you automatically think of protection, provision, warmth and tenderness? God reveals himself in the Bible as a gentle, forgiving Father, desiring to be intimately involved with each and every detail of our lives.’¹⁷

McClung says ‘God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them’ (Genesis 1:27)—maleness and femaleness were part of His character, and that a full revelation of God’s love in a family needs a father and a mother. In single-parent families, God will help compensate for the missing love of either parent through prayer and His help, but that together they reflect a better picture of who God is.¹⁸

4.2 Misconceptions of God’s love

Floyd McClung lists seven wrong perceptions of fathering. With God’s help, Christians should try to break negative cycles that are clouding God’s plan for the healthy upbringing of children.

4.2.1 Parental authority

Children or teenagers, who have been abused by their fathers can lose the understanding of the love of a father. They can lose respect for their parent’s authority, and the concept of a loving Heavenly Father is not understood. A

generation wounded like this often does the same to their own children and so it continues. McClung asks

Is there no one to comfort us? Who will father the children of men?
Whose arms are big enough for all the lonely children of the world?
Who weeps over our pains? Who will comfort us in our loneliness?
Only a broken-hearted father who is rejected by the little ones he
yearns to heal.¹⁹

4.2.2 Parental faithfulness

If, as a child one has experienced the complete absence of a father, perhaps due to death or divorce, it is likely that he will lose trust in a person to be faithful. Can he even understand a life-long marriage and faithfulness between a man and his wife and parents with children? Can he trust in God to care unconditionally?

What destroys trust in parents and then in mankind:

Maybe you were 'orphaned' by the demands of your parent's career.
Or is it just the childhood memory of broken promises or neglect that
haunts you? Did you scream for hours as a baby, while nobody
came to relieve you of your discomfort and hunger? Did you whimper
behind locked doors, a small child, forgotten and alone?²⁰

Do you find it difficult to sense God's presence with you? Is your heart soft towards God or hardened with distrust?

If we cannot feel God's love, it is not God's fault, but that of those around us. Look at the lives of godly people—living lives of faith and trust in God. Be encouraged—there is no room for doubt; we serve a mighty and faithful God!

Floyd McClung reminds us,

You were briefly loaned to human parents who, for a few years, were supposed to have showered you with love like His love. The love and security of a good home and family were intended by God to prepare you for His love. If our parents have failed us then we must recognise that fact, forgive them, and go on to open our hearts to God's love.²¹

'For the LORD will give justice to His people and have compassion on His servants' (Psalm 135:14). 'The Lord isn't really being slow about His promise, as some people think. No, He is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent' (2 Peter 3:9).

God loves us and cares for us...reminding us that the hurting and angry need to be reminded of His love. 'For I know the plans I have for you,' says the LORD. 'They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope' (Jeremiah 29:11). This was said to the Jews in exile in Babylon; if they turned to God He would take them back home and bless them. The mind-set of the depressed and hopeless can be changed. The positive thought patterns God wants for us are clear: 'Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise' (Philippians 4:8).

We are reminded of God's view of us versus that of Satan. 'The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life' (John 10:10). We need to intercede against Satan's desire to further damage families and add to the despair that so many children face when neglected and abused.

4.2.3 Parental generosity

Parents often punish their children if they damage or potentially damage things in the home. This can give the children the message that things are more important than children, distorting their view of God. How often do the children hear their parents say 'I love you'? God is not stingy, possessive, or materialistic. People are more valuable than things. He shows His generosity in more important ways than just through material things. He gives us that which is intangible but of far greater value, namely, forgiveness, mercy and love.²²

How can believers help children who are deprived? If we show a generous attitude, not by giving materially expensive things, but little things that mean much, especially things which can comfort them, like a tiny soft toy which they can love and which can be presented with a message of God's love. There is much social welfare which may help physically and financially, but the church has the 'pearl of greatest price'—the

Gospel message. The church can change lives by presenting Bibles and age-appropriate devotionals to hurting children, by showing hospitality and interest in them as individuals.

4.2.4 Parental affection

What about boys who are not always shown affection by their fathers? And there is often an attitude of 'boys should be tough and should not cry'.²³ God loves us dearly and hurts with us. He says, 'I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them' (Hosea 11:4). 'Of Benjamin he said, "The beloved of the LORD dwells in safety. The High God surrounds him all day long, and dwells between his shoulders"' (Deuteronomy 33:12).

The body of Christ really needs to come alongside the hurting children—to build long-term deep loving nurturing relationships, allowing tears—'You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book' (Psalm 56:8). Even Jesus shed tears for Lazarus when he died and he was moved by the grief of Martha. 'Jesus wept' (John 11:35).

4.2.5 Parental presence

We are reminded by Floyd McClung that even the best parents fall short in this area, but our heavenly Father is there continually. There are times when tired inattentive parents give half-attention to their children. Quality time spent with children cannot be substituted by material possessions or entertainment.²⁴ Would Jesus spend quality time with the hurting in intentional visits, phone-calls and actual discipleship if He was here on earth...is this not what He wants us to do for Him?

4.2.6 Parental acceptance

This is a huge problem. Often what the parents want for their children to achieve, and their lack of unconditional love, gives the child a poor self-image. That lack of parental acceptance often leads to the child's inability to understand God's love for him. He thinks he has to earn God's love because that is a reflection of how he expects his parents to treat him.²⁵

4.2.7 Parental communication

There is often poor communication in families. Warm, open communication is sometimes difficult for men to show their children. McClung recalls a girl who found it difficult to pray, and on investigation it was discovered that it was mainly because her father was quiet and distant and so this was her concept of Father-God. His suggested remedy for her was to bring the problem to God and to learn to forgive her dad, and that this would open communication with God and with her parents.²⁶

What can God's people do to help hurting children or teenagers who feel that their parents or carers do not understand them? If we made a special effort to be good listeners so that hurting children in particular have an open channel of communication, it would be a great comfort and help to them. They can gently be helped to see both points of view and learn to become more understanding. When they understand the depths of love and forgiving nature of Father-God, they may soften their attitude and be reconciled with parents, carers or siblings and become more understanding themselves.

From a teenager's heart to his/her parents

1. If you love me please tell me—I need to hear.
2. If you love me please show me...Sometimes it seems that you do not trust me, and that makes me doubt your love at times.
3. When I really need something, especially a basic, like food, I feel bad when it seems that you have spent that money on yourself.
4. There are things I really want to share with you—please give the time to listen to me (and without music or TV background sound).
5. When I need direction I really would like you to talk to me and to guide me.
6. Please tell me what is expected of me—I need to know boundaries and why.
7. When I have done something wrong and need discipline, please be fair and do not discipline me in anger.
8. Please give me the opportunity to hear about the Lord and His Word.
9. You are naturally my role model—I watch your actions and often follow you.
10. I love you, and I am sorry for not telling you or showing you enough!

A list of other concerns some youth may have:

- Is my home a safe place, where my well-being is really important—is it a place of safety where I am protected and appreciated?
- Is there a balance between household chores and responsibilities and time to enjoy creativity and for studies and relaxation?
- Is there a caring adult in the home?
- Am I encouraged and given hope?
- Does someone stand up for me when I am right and being challenged?
- When I am hurting is there someone to comfort me?
- When I am sick, am I cared for so I can recover?
- Am I taught the truth—especially from the Bible?
- Am I really fathered (given teaching, identity, protection and provision)?
- Am I really mothered (loved and nurtured)?

If some of these concerns are a problem for you, know that Father-God loves you very, very much and is there for you. 'And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love' (Romans 8:38).

What can we say?

God is wonderful! It is we who let Him down—our parents are sinners and so are we—we need the Father-heart of God in the home!

Questions I need to ask myself:

1. Do I honour my father and my mother (or carer/s)?
2. Do I love them—and show it?
3. Do I try to do the right things in the way I live at home?
4. Do I help when my parents or brothers or sisters are in distress?
5. Do my family ever feel refreshed and encouraged by me?
6. Am I a friend to my parents and siblings?
7. Do I stand up for a member of family who is being unfairly treated?
8. Do I comfort hurting family members?
9. Do I help when anyone in the home is sick or tired?

10. Do I share with needy members of family?
11. Do I give right advice (W.W.J.D... (What would Jesus do)—type advice?
12. Do I share the problems of a family member when they feel discouraged?
13. Am I strong, especially spiritually or emotionally?
14. Do I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ—as friend and Lord?
15. Can my family members confide in me, knowing that I can be trusted?
16. Am I faithful to my family...or do I sometimes speak against them?
17. Am I a peace-maker?
18. Is there a peace or gentleness in my presence?
19. Is there a peaceful restful atmosphere in my home?
20. Am I a helper?
21. Am I honest?
22. Am I sometimes deceitful?
23. Do I apologize when I am wrong?
24. Can I forgive?
25. Do I speak about the Lord in my home?
26. Do I have daily devotions—pray and read the Bible in my home?

These questions show us how weak we are without God. Invite Him into your home, whatever home you have—happy, sad, functional, or dysfunctional.

5. Conclusion

We have been looking at children, especially in relation to Father-God and how their relationships, particularly with human fathers, affects their concept of God. This has led us to consider how the church can counteract relationship problems by showing some of the characteristics of Father-God in their relationships with their children.

What about the parents who abuse or neglect their children? Pray for them, show compassion and care towards them even if this is met with resistance. Agape love shows God's care and compassion. God can change a heart, convict of sin, give a spirit of remorse, and bring about repentance and a 'new heart' through the Holy Spirit, and this will really make the rehabilitation of 'children victimisers' successful. Just as John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus' ministry, let us be instrumental in lifting Jesus up as the Saviour and Redeemer, the One who loves us and brings reconciliation.

The LORD Almighty says, "The day is coming when all proud and evil people will burn like straw. On that day they will burn up, and there will be nothing left of them. But for you who obey me, my saving power will rise on you like the sun and bring healing like the sun's rays. You will be as free and happy as calves let out of a stall. On the day when I act, you will overcome the wicked, and they will be like dust under your feet. 'Remember the teachings of my servant Moses, the laws and commands which I gave him at Mount Sinai for all the people of Israel to obey.' "But before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes, I will send you the prophet Elijah. He will bring fathers and children together again; otherwise I would have to come and destroy your country." (Malachi 4:1–6)

If God is for us, who can be against us? Certainly not God, who did not even keep back his own Son, but offered him for us all! He gave us his Son—will he not also freely give us all things? Who will accuse God's chosen people? God himself declares them not guilty! Who, then, will condemn them? Not Christ Jesus, who died, or rather, who was raised to life and is at the right side of God, pleading with him for us! Who, then, can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble do it, or hardship or persecution or hunger or poverty or danger or death? As the scripture says, "For your sake we are in danger of death at all times; we are treated like sheep that are going to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us! For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below—there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31–39).

Endnotes

- ¹ Father's Love Letter. Available from *www.FathersLoveLetter.com*. Accessed 2013.05.18
- ² Johannes Malherbe, head of SATS post-graduate school (2013-)—expert practitioner in children's ministry—Illustration of the hand representing the family. Johannes has authored a book on gender: Same Difference.
- ³ Stormie Omartian 2004:44 *The Power of Praying*, listed qualities of God and references—adapted as a table. .
- ⁴ Roy Zuck 1996:113. *Precious in His sight*. Mentions over a thousand biblical references to children.
- ⁵ Dan Brewster 2010:4. *Future Impact: Connecting Child, Church and Mission* being honoured by children's ministry practitioners for his many years of ground-breaking children's ministry importance, each writing a chapter in a Festschrift for end 2013
- ⁶ Keith White 2012:29. *Introducing Child Theology*. Caring in the heritage of his family for orphans at Millgrove House and champion of the Holistic Child Theology Movement.
- ⁷ Ibid Zuck R 1996:36
- ⁸ William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker 2001:261-263. Ephesians (in New Testament Commentary Vol. 7).
- ⁹ Roy Utley 2008 Characteristics of God the Father. Online article: Fatherhood of God—Free Bible Commentary.
- ¹⁰ Ibid Zuck R 1996:108.
- ¹¹ Marcia Bunge 2009:227-229 (Lecturer—expert on Children) Historical Perspectives of children in the Church)
- ¹² George Barna 1996:44 (researcher: special interest numbers under age 18 coming to Christ—over 80% in US)
- ¹³ Ibid Zuck (1996:108).
- ¹⁴ Veronica Rae 2002: Baptist Union women's ministry keynote address when in office: *Mentorship*.
- ¹⁵ Ralph Gower and Fred Wright 1987: *New manners and customs of Bible Times*—interesting practices.
- ¹⁶ Floyd McClung 1985:15. *The Father-heart of God: Drug addicts*
- ¹⁷ Ibid 22 (God the Father).
- ¹⁸ Ibid 23 (God helping single parents).
- ¹⁹ Ibid 26 (Loaned to parents).
- ²⁰ Ibid 25 (Parental faithfulness
- ²¹ Ibid 29 (Parental generosity).
- ²² Ibid 28 (Parental affection).
- ²³ Ibid 25 (Parental presence).
- ²⁴ Ibid 31 (Parental acceptance).
- ²⁵ Ibid 33 (Parental communication).

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- All hand-painted illustrations are by Carmen Niemand.

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