

openly faithful to his spouse. This is the first and most important principle for the father's role in marriage. This is why the principle follows a covenant of "life and peace" (Mal. 2:5).

A word for those who have no children in the home: you still have the opportunity to be fruitful and bear godly seed. You can sow the seed of the gospel and become spiritual parents. It's not the same, but you can turn your affections toward another kind of 'little one', who may have no other family to love, or no one else to look after them but what they find in the household of God. Whatever they may have lost in the absence of one father in faith, they may in part find in a brother or sister who shows them the faithfulness of God in care.

A lesson for sisters

Before leaving this principle, there is also a lesson for sisters in the context of faithfulness. Most of the blame for unfaithfulness in marriage in the Scriptures falls on men. From the wayward sons of God in Noah's time to the men of Sodom and Benjamin, from David and Solomon to the priests of Ezra's time, many men have, like dumb oxen, forsaken their roles as *one father*, following selfish passions into spiritual ruin. But in these last days we live in times where the neutralisation of

genders, combined with rampant philosophies of individual freedom (especially for women) and the perceived right of happiness at the expense of others, places the same temptations on women that in the past were mainly experienced by men.

Many of us live in societies today where it is just as easy for a woman to support herself as it is for a man; where she can spend most of her day in the service of, or commanding over, men. Like her husband, she can have an overwhelming exposure to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. This can lead her heart away from the husband of her youth, despising his aging or his weaknesses, and causing her to put him away (emotionally or legally), perhaps even leading *him* to commit adultery—a warning against which Jesus generally applied to men.

If she sees herself in a role where she is competing with her husband for money, or freedom, or status, she may also compete with him in sin. Therefore the same principles that apply to husbands and fathers in the Lord also apply to wives and mothers. The wife's responsibility for raising godly seed is the same, and is just as vital to their faith, as her husband's. That brings us to *her* roles as bride and mother, which are dealt with in Part 2 of this article ([see p. 259](#)).

The uncertainties of parenting

One of the things you quickly learn as a new parent is that you don't have all the answers. Far from it! Here, Simon and Lorna Dean (Bishops Stortford, UK) explore some of the uncertainties, anxieties and heart-searching that accompany parenthood. What lessons can we learn—and what comfort can we gain—when we look at the experiences of Bible characters? They didn't necessarily have all the answers, and neither could they control the free will of their fellows. But they found assurance and a place to bring their concerns in their relationship with God.

ONESIMUS MAY BE the closest thing we have in Scripture to a runaway teenager. In his letter to Philemon, Paul is clearly handling a painful situation, messy with emotional conflict. Paul appeals to the compassion of the wronged master, calling the fugitive "my son

. . . begotten while in my chains" (v. 10),* no doubt hoping Philemon will see the escaped slave in the same light. The very need for the request suggests that Philemon feels less than inclined to take Onesimus back. Paul can only guess at how the event will be of benefit: "For *perhaps* he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever" (v. 15). What parent has not struggled to make sense of a crisis with a child where, at best, the hope is that 'perhaps' the event will turn out for the good?

Uncertainty in daily affairs

The message of our salvation in Christ gives us assurance and certainty in a world spinning out of control. There can, however, be uncertainty when

* Quotations from the NKJV.

we face the daily task of working on the details. This can be especially true when dealing with the challenge of raising our children to love God. The events that occur in our children's lives, especially those moments of crisis that stem from our action or inaction as a parent, are challenging precisely because we cannot see the long-term impact.

Who would not wish, when faced with a child who wishes to make this friendship/pursue that educational route/choose that boy- or girlfriend, to be able to consult with God on a proposed course of action as David did: "It happened after this that David inquired of the LORD, saying, 'Shall I go up to any of the cities of Judah?' And the LORD said to him, 'Go up'. David said, 'Where shall I go up?' And He said, 'To Hebron'" (2 Sam. 2:1)?

We do not receive explicit confirmation that our decisions are the right ones. Our experience is more akin to Mordecai's when, having seen Esther taken into the custody of King Ahasuerus, and having advised her not to show her Jewish identity, he is left outside the court watching and wondering: "And every day Mordecai paced in front of the court of the women's quarters, to learn of Esther's welfare and what was happening to her" (Est. 2:11).

Mordecai had made his decision as Esther's 'father', and now he had to live with it. As parents we agonise over the right course of action, anxious always to see our children develop spiritually. We act, or decide not to act. Then, unable seemingly to do any more, we are left with that daily walk up and down outside our children's lives wondering what will happen.

Responsibilities of parents and children

Centuries ago a man was analysing the names in the lineage of the Lord in Matthew 1:7,8 when he mined this golden exhortation:

"Lord, I find the genealogy of my Saviour strangely chequered with four remarkable changes in four generations. Rehoboam begat Abia; a bad father begat a bad son. Abia begat Asa: a bad father and a good son. Asa begat Jehoshaphat: a good father and a good son. Jehoshaphat begat Joram: a good father and a bad son. I see Lord, from hence that my father's piety cannot be entailed [passed on]: that is bad news for me. But I see also that actual impiety is not hereditary: that is good news for my son".

From the unlikelyst of places, strong reassurance and guidance is given to all who responsibly and

prayerfully face the daily challenge of bringing up their children to know the discipline and teaching of the Lord.

There is comfort here for parents who are conscious of having made mistakes in raising their children, and still more, therefore, for those who, as far as they know, have done their best for children who develop in ways that sadden. Sons and daughters grown to adulthood must answer to God for themselves. Samuel's sons did not walk in the ways of their father (1 Sam. 8:1-3). In spite of his great spiritual stature we may assume that Samuel failed in the same way as his predecessor Eli; however, the text nowhere attributes any blame to Samuel for the spiritual condition of his sons. Although we know nothing of his strengths or weaknesses as a father, this silence indicates that the wickedness of his sons was viewed as their sin, not his.

The burden of teaching in Proverbs is the same: a father and mother can and should teach a child about wisdom, and urge him to pursue it; this is their responsibility. However, they cannot make the decision for the child. Indeed, a child of wise and faithful parents may make the wrong choices in spite of their careful efforts to train him otherwise. While parents will suffer *grief* at the foolishness of a son, they are not said to suffer *guilt*; for he alone must bear the consequences of his decision.

We are very aware of the challenge of being parents who do not know all the right answers. Aside from our heavenly Father, a model parent does not exist, even in the Bible. If our children choose to follow God, we dare not take credit for the grace of God in their lives. And when we have failed we may find comfort here too, for God has provided forgiveness for our parental sins just as He has for all others. Our failures at parenting will not be the reason our children are godless, just as our successes will not be the reason they are godly. For every sin there is forgiveness. Remember that the unpardonable sin is not the sin of failing as a parent.

Taking the long view

We may be too quick to despair of our children when only time will tell. We are happy enough with outward appearances of obedience and conformity, but rather we should delight in seeing a real spirit of obedience that will result in repentance even after foolishness and sin. Give God time to work. Suppose that the father of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11-32) is a brother in your

ecclesia and his son a troubled teenager. What would you have expected the father to do when his son asked for his money, knowing what he would do with it? Did he fret with concern over the likely outcome if the request were granted?

The 'father' has no existence outside the parable, but we can imagine how any of us in such a position might agonise. Would you, looking on as the inheritance was handed over, have congratulated the father for his wise decision? This father is not only a model for us to follow as parents; he is also a picture of God Himself as He deals with us. It was only by failing that the prodigal son came to himself. It was after wasting his money and having to live with the pigs that he recognised that he was lost. Only then did he see the truth and return.

Which son, the parable asks us, was wiser and more godly: the son who never dishonoured his father, but who had never come to understand grace, or the son who sinned and repented? We may have to wait longer than we would like to receive a child "safe and sound" (v. 27), but are nevertheless encouraged that this really can and does happen.

So we must take the long view. And the Lord urges us all to act now while there is opportunity and not be trapped in uncertainty or doubt. We can be confident that sound Scriptural teaching is always best, and have confidence, too, that parents do indeed generally know best.

The example of Nehemiah

A good Scriptural template for action is found in the approach of Nehemiah, who, worried and anxious about a sad situation back in Jerusalem, resolves to act. He crowds out doubt and does not procrastinate; and, just as he builds up the walls of Jerusalem, so we can put together a family unit in which our children can grow to love the Lord.

He prays, he plans, and then he proceeds. We feel at times that confrontations with our children leave us with our own crumbling walls and burnt down gates. We feel quite alone and at a loss in the midst of those ruins. So Nehemiah prayed (1:4-11). And prayed *first*. We often tend to leave prayer to last, when all else has failed. Jesus speaks to us clearly that we should always pray and not lose heart (Lk. 18:1). Rather than despairing, Nehemiah has a strategy for rebuilding (2:5-8).

Our task is to build a strong family. All the fine detail might not be plain to us as we begin, but

we know that inaction is no answer. Nehemiah proceeds, showing strength of character, acting in confidence because he has begun in prayer (2:11). He is discouraged but not downcast, and he knows he is completely dependent on the help of the Lord. Nehemiah was in the right in what he determined to do, and he saw that the hand of God was upon him (vv. 8,18). We can share his confidence, knowing that God is pleased with those who seek to strengthen the foundation of their families with Biblical values.

Nehemiah's plans are, to some extent, made up as he goes along, and we can relate to that. When he arrives in Jerusalem he invests time looking around and assessing which course of action to take (vv. 13-15). He responds to the circumstances he finds on the ground rather than pursuing a predetermined and defined path that might not actually be the best way forward.

This is the way we have to tread, not always a sure-footed and headlong march towards what is right. Rather, in humility, perhaps taking a more twisting and turning path, we respond, like the Apostle Paul, to every individual situation as best fits (1 Cor. 9:20-23), knowing that our children may respond differently to each of our approaches as parents, and that our ideas may need to be varied or dispensed with. Paul asked the immature Corinthians, "What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?" (4:21). The answer for our children should be: Yes; both.

At each stage of his work Nehemiah stops and calls on the Lord: "Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and . . . set a watch" (Neh. 4:9). He knows the task is too much for him alone and so enlists help (2:18). Call on the wisdom of brothers and sisters, for they will always be willing to help your family walk to the Kingdom. Don't be dissuaded by setbacks; Nehemiah had to deal with squabbling and opposition. We have to be in for the long haul. Frustration will arise from time to time with the seeming lack of progress (4:10), but always keep your mind on the prize of life in the Kingdom for your children. Like Joshua, choose courage and not fear, "For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (Heb. 13:5; cf. Josh. 1:5). And know for certain that what looked at first a desolate ruin became—in time and with grace—a restored city of beauty that resounded with praise and joy (Neh. 12:43).

Whatever uncertainties we face, we need to keep praying, planning and moving ahead, seeking the aid and encouragement of our brethren

and sisters and overcoming all opposition, just like Nehemiah. Do not limit the power of our Father, Who is working even when we find it difficult to see how. Remember those words of Paul to Philemon cited at the beginning: "For perhaps he departed for a while for this pur-

pose, that you might receive him forever". There will be many times when we can only wonder, 'Perhaps this will turn out right', as Paul did. But we are assured that it is our Father's will that all in our family should be received by Him forever.

The changing scenes of life

Letting go: leaving home; marriage; grandchildren; and beyond

In this last part of the series looking at the different stages of parenting, Tecwyn and Mary Morgan (Washwood Heath, Birmingham, UK) considers what is involved in letting go so that children can begin to lead their own lives as young adults and ultimately establish families of their own.

GENESIS HAS been called 'the seed bed of the Bible' because so many Biblical themes and ideas have their roots there. Man and woman, made in God's image, were to have dominion, they were to help one another in their lifelong union, and so on. So it highlights the importance of coping with the changes of later life to realise that our first parents were instructed right at the outset about the need to let go and let their children leave home.

Adam had just said of Eve, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man", when the inspired comment comes, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:23,24). Who made that comment at the time is not immediately clear. It could have been an instructing angel, for the teaching that they were to be "one flesh" was extremely pertinent to their life together; they needed to realise that from the beginning. They were to develop a spiritual relationship, as well as a physical one, for the importance of 'oneness' of mind and spirit steadily grows (cf. Deut. 6:4,5; Mal. 2:14-16; Jno. 17:11; 1 Cor 6:16,17; Eph 1:10; 5:28-31).

Moses

In some respects it would be fitting if Moses had added the comment when he was bringing together the original patriarchal records in the first five books. (There are some indications that he added a few words of explanation here and there, all of them inspired and all intended to assist

his early readers; for example, Genesis 13:10.) He was eminently qualified to write about leaving home. He left home once when still young, being adopted by Pharaoh's daughter; then he left his adopted home in Egypt twice, first in fear, then in faith (Ex. 2:15; 12:51). At each stage of his life Moses learned new skills and became suited for what God wanted:

- in Pharaoh's palace he learned about leadership
- in Jethro's home and out with the sheep he unlearned much and learned more about care and compassion
- with his young family in Midian he learned about fatherhood
- when called by God to redeem His people he learned to leave his family behind and go it alone
- in Egypt with Aaron he learned to be utterly God-dependent
- in the wilderness he learned patience, humility, meekness and much else.

With his family restored to him he saw his children and probably his grandchildren growing up, leaving the family home and making their own way in life.