

P.S.

New baby

AS I WRITE this, our new daughter is turning one week old. As every parent knows, there is not a lot of time for anything during this period beyond looking after the other children, keeping up with chores, sterilising bottles, perhaps, changing nappies, winding baby, and giving Mum a little bit of space to rest and recover.

But where time can be snatched, it's also a time for thought. A new baby is a major enterprise, certainly, but it is also a source of major spiritual lessons. Romans 8 is a case in point. A lot of the language in the chapter revolves around pregnancy, children and childbirth (and, of course, adoption too). The 'groaning' and 'travailing' in pain which the creation undergoes recalls the pangs of a woman in labour. The "groanings which cannot be uttered" from later in the chapter may continue the metaphor into the life of a newborn infant. A baby certainly cannot talk, but it does know how to groan and cry—and so it does, from the very first instant it is born! It is up to the intuition of the parent (with some helpful clues like wet nappies) to work out what the cause of the cry may be and to take appropriate action. And if a human parent can, by and large, discern their child's needs, then we can be confident in the ability of our heavenly Father to discern ours.

There are plenty of other lessons. The idea of a little person growing inside a mother recalls Paul's talk of travailing on behalf of other believers (his 'children') until Christ be formed in them. The passage about the "sincere milk of the word" is another example of the Scriptural use of the childbirth metaphor, and there are many lessons from the helplessness, dependency, need and trust of a small child.

Free will

But the thing I always think of most is the issue of free will, of control, and of being able to let go, and of how being a human parent lets us understand a glimpse of God as a parent. As I look down at my daughter, I have no idea what life will hold for her. I have no *control* over whether she will be a spiritually motivated person or not, and I will have to live with myself (and her) whichever of these turns out to be the case. All I can do is my best, wanting the best for her, and seeking to encourage her to do *her* best to serve God.

I have no control—and I could not have it, even if I wanted to. The investment into parenting, given these massive uncertainties that we all face, is considerable. But consider the investment for God in parenting *us*! He *could* have control, power to make us do whatever He wanted, like robots. But He chooses to relinquish that control at some level to let us have free will and live our lives. That involves tremendous risk (if we can talk of it in human terms). It involves lots of waste (in terms of creativity and effort for those who do not choose to align themselves with His purpose). And it involves a lot of heartache (again, in human terms) as God seeks the best for His children (as we all do), only to see them, in many cases, squander their opportunities.

Our Father in heaven

There's a sense of trepidation, then, in approaching parenting, but also a richness of opportunity to learn about God and what it is like for Him as He trains and influences us, but then stands back, as He must, in order to let us make our mistakes. While we would all seek the salvation of our children, as God would seek *ours*, we cannot make it happen; it is they, not us, who must accept Christ's sacrifice (or reject it) on their behalf. And whatever decision they make, we will learn more about our heavenly Father in the process, whether it be in joy or in sorrow. Just as we cannot control our children, only influence them, so God will not force us to be saved, but He will help us considerably if that is what we seek.

To be allowed to influence a baby, a toddler, a small child and then a teenager in spiritual matters, as well as to help them prepare for life generally, is a tremendous privilege. That influence should not be underestimated, and we need to be good and wise stewards of it. It is one of the most precious assets God may ever give us. We cannot guarantee the outcome, because that is contingent on the free will of someone else. But God has similarly made Himself contingent, at least in some measure with respect to His desires, upon our free will. In inviting us to be parents, God is inviting us to be like Himself, and to experience, in some small way, what He has experienced with humankind.

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