

30-DAY DEVOTIONAL

Family Matters

doing life together.



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S T E E T N O O

week 1: Challenges Facing the Family

- 6 Day One:** A Balanced Life
- 7 Day Two:** The Family Under Stress
- 8 Day Three:** Communication and Conflict
- 9 Day Four:** Money
- 10 Day Five:** Disconnection and the Family of God
- 11 Story:** The Importance of Boundaries

week 2: One Another

- 12 Day One:** Philippians 2:1-5
- 13 Day Two:** Ephesians 4:1-6
- 14 Day Three:** Colossians 3:12-14
- 15 Day Four:** 1 Corinthians 13
- 16 Day Five:** The Fruits of the Spirit
- 17 Story:** Learning Wisdom from Our Families

week 3: Marriage

- 18 Day One:** Ephesians 5:21-33
- 19 Day Two:** Emotional Intelligence
- 20 Day Three:** Shared Goals
- 21 Day Four:** God's Plan for Marriage
- 22 Day Five:** Family Comes in Many Shapes and Sizes
- 23 Story:** Trusting God in Infertility

week 4: Parenting

- 24 Day One:** The State of Parenting
- 25 Day Two:** The Ways Culture is Shaping Your Kids
- 26 Day Three:** What Do Kids Need?
- 27 Day Four:** Discipling Your Kids
- 28 Day Five:** Parenting in Community
- 29 Story:** Making Space

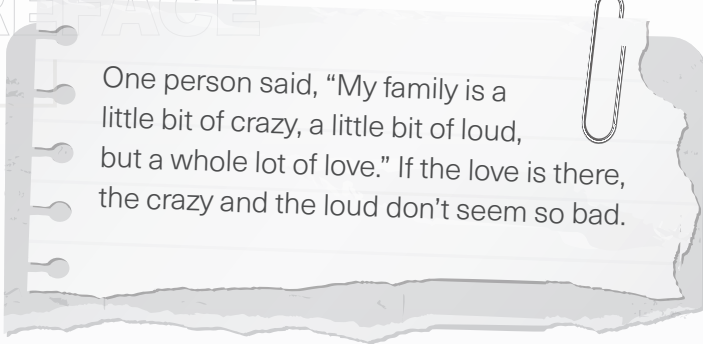
week 5: Sexuality

- 30 Day One:** The State of Sexuality
- 31 Day Two:** The Meaning of Sex, Part 1
- 32 Day Three:** The Meaning of Sex, Part 2
- 33 Day Four:** Forgiveness and Healing
- 34 Day Five:** Bodies

week 6: All Kinds of Families

- 36 Day One:** Divorce and Remarriage
- 37 Day Two:** Singleness
- 38 Day Three:** Aging
- 39 Day Four:** Adoption and Hospitality
- 40 Day Five:** Managing Transitions in Families
- 41 Story:** Not the Brady Bunch
- 42 Prayer:** Everyone Here Has Value in God's Eyes

PREFACE



One person said, "My family is a little bit of crazy, a little bit of loud, but a whole lot of love." If the love is there, the crazy and the loud don't seem so bad.

Home is the place where we all want to go. Family is the place we all want to belong. Many of us are no longer sure we will have much of a home or a family. This devotional resource is to help you shape a home and a family. It is harder than ever, and it is more important than ever.

The website, *Flowing Data*, identifies and illustrates the 50 most common family types in America. They illustrate 13 varieties of the Nuclear family, 24 variations of an Extended family, and 13 versions of a Composite family. The nuclear family in its many varieties still accounts for about 50% of all families, but the type of family experience in our nation covers a wide spectrum.

It can be hard to talk about family. Conversations about marriage, infidelity, divorce, remarriage, parenting, single parenting, singleness, childlessness, or adoption—all these experiences are among the most important and painful we will ever have. We have expectations and disappointments. Many of us have at least some guilt and shame, as well as anger, hurt, and fear about "family."

Jonathan Sacks has a great appreciation for the traditions of family, marriage, and parenting. He says, "What makes the traditional family remarkable . . . is what it brought together: sexual drive, physical desire, friendship, companionship, emotional kinship and love, the begetting of children and their protection and care, their early education, and induction into an identity and a history. Seldom has any institution woven together so many different drives and desires, roles and responsibilities. It made sense of the world and gave it a human face, the face of love."



Therefore, we should be concerned about the failure and decline of the family in our culture. Family, no matter what its form, is harder than ever. In our time, Sacks says, “Sex has been divorced from love, love from commitment, marriage from having children, and having children from responsibility.” He continues by saying that while no one wants to go back to the narrow prejudices of the past—loveless marriages, authoritarian families, or harsh parenthood—nor do we want to allow family to decline and disappear.

The Judeo-Christian worldview placed great value on covenantal marriage. *Covenant* was the word used to describe the deep commitment God made with his people. Covenant is a relationship of love and loyalty; faithfulness and fidelity; strong and steadfast; and always of mutual trust, honor, and respect. That is what everyone wants and needs. When we are connected to a family like this we flourish. When families fall apart we all hurt. Children hurt most of all.

This resource will give you biblical insights, short reflections, and practical guidance to build the kind of family you want and need. If you have a good family system in place, you’ll find ways to tweak and improve things. If your family is struggling, you’ll find the first steps, as well as the hope and strength you need to change what needs to be changed.

A resource this size can only be a starting point on every theme we cover. Next steps are often provided, as well as suggestions for resources to take you farther.

Through this resource, we want you to experience the fresh starts, second chances, and new beginnings Jesus has for you and your family. This is no time for guilt or shame; instead, it is a time to receive the grace and love of God for your family.

A Balanced Life

There are 168 hours per week. If you are an executive, or a stay-at-home mom, or a teacher, or a traveling salesperson, you have the same 168 hours, no more no less. You have the same 168 hours to devote to your family, your calling, your walk with God, and your community. You have the same 168 hours to cook meals, walk the dog, answer emails, and love your neighbors well. In the context of all we have to accomplish, all we hope to do, all those we hope to serve, 168 hours doesn't seem like enough time, does it?

When we think about those 168 hours, we often think about balance. We think about a perfect scale, where everything is perfectly measured, where we can be the ideal spouse, the ideal parent, the ideal Christ follower, the ideal employee, the ideal friend—where all the pieces of us will hang together in perfect harmony.

Except, it doesn't work that way.

We face limitations of time, resources, money, and energy. We simply cannot be everything to everyone all the time. Women, perhaps more than men, place a great deal of emphasis on achieving a perfect work/life balance. To accomplish all that God has for us—in our communities, our homes, our relationships—we need constant dependence on God. We need to rest in the knowledge of his grace and care for us. We need to participate in his command to take Sabbath rest.

No matter where you are in your life stage, single or married, parenting or not, young or old, we all need that same dependency on God as we seek that elusive work/life balance. Scripture tells us that we are fruitful when we abide in Christ. God has created us to do good works—good works in our families, homes, communities, and churches. But rather than first seeking success and balance in those arenas, we begin in humble obedience and dependence on the One who loves us and cares for us.

Read Matthew 6:30-34

Ask God to help you depend on him for a proper balance in your life.

The Family Under Stress

“I’m maxed out.” “I don’t think I can take much more.” “I just don’t know what to do. I’m exhausted.” Modern life is not kind to families.

Read through the Book of Genesis and you will see every family in Genesis has MAJOR problems. That is true throughout the Bible. While challenges and struggles are not new, the level of stress the family is under today can be overwhelming. While challenges and problems increase, our ability to handle them hasn’t kept pace.

Our modern lifestyle is fast and frantic. There is too much to do and not enough time to do it. So many of us are unhappy at work, and when we come home, we are in a bad sort of way. Our kids’ schedules are packed. It seems like we are always running someone somewhere. Many of us have financial problems. We are in debt and go further in debt to enjoy a lifestyle our culture tells us we deserve, even if we can’t afford it.

More people deal with depression and anxiety. Families are more divided on the issues of today. As families move through the stages of life, new problems and challenges emerge. Age brings a new set of difficulties. The list of stressors goes on and on. The old idea of the home as a haven (*a place of safety and refuge*) seems quaint. Stressors are not going away, but you must deal with them by:

- **Saying NO to many things that make life more complicated.**
- **Eliminating and simplifying some things that keep you constantly drained. What can you eliminate or reduce?**
- **Developing a deeper life with Christ and finding strength and wisdom in him for growing your family.**
- **Coming up with a new plan to deal with the problems that hurt your family.**
- **Doing this as a family. Change the family system and not just a member in the family.**
- **Using counseling services, which may be very beneficial. It will be worth the time and investment.**

Pick just 1 problem that is hurting your family. What are three or four things you can do about that problem? Keep at it. It will take time.

Communication and Conflict

A few years ago, I was attempting to order dinner in a restaurant in Paris, and I momentarily forgot how to say the word “please” in French. I stumbled through my order, realizing that I sounded rather rude, but not knowing how to make things better. When I finally remembered how to say it, I was thankful to be able to improve my communication!

Trying to express our feelings well to those closest to us can sometimes feel like speaking a foreign language. Communication is one of the biggest problems in all sorts of family relations. Thankfully, everyone can work to improve their communication skills, and scripture has a lot of wisdom on the subject. James 1:19-20 says, “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, *slow to speak* and slow to become angry [...]”

Much of our communication styles are shaped from our families of origin. If you grew up in a family of people who were quick to shout, it is likely that you might be quick to shout as well. Similarly, if you grew up with healthy communication modeled for you, you may communicate well without much thought.

But that doesn’t mean that you are doomed to repeat the failures or successes of your parents! As Proverbs 18:21 (MSG) says, “Words kill, words give life; they’re either poison or fruit—you choose.” You have a choice to let your words give life or death. You can choose to be a better communicator than what was modeled for you. Are you giving life or poison with what you say?

Ask God to help you speak words that bring life to your family. Do you struggle to communicate well with a spouse, child, or another relative? Ask for the Holy Spirit’s help as you seek to communicate well.

Money

One of the main pressures on many families today is money. For married couples, differing views on financial management often lead to disagreements. In fact, financial disagreements are one of the leading causes for divorce. And for single-parent households, lack of financial resources can cause great amounts of stress. Issues surrounding money and inheritances can wreak havoc on siblings when caring for aging parents. And skyrocketing costs for basic necessities put extra pressure on all of us.

Did you know that Jesus spoke more about money than he did on almost any other topic? Money and possessions can have a unique hold on our heart. And that hold on our hearts can disrupt our relationships with our spouses, children, and family members. We can find misplaced meaning in our bank accounts and possessions. We can worry about our needs and forget that God promised to provide.

Oftentimes, disagreements about money aren't really about money at all. They are about feelings of security, questions about priorities, and frustration at feeling unheard. What if, instead of conflict, money discussions could be a time to get to know your family members better? What if chatting over a budget could be a time where you gain insight into your partner's priorities? How can you transform money conflicts?

To start, take your money challenges to God. Ask for his help in transforming money conflicts into opportunities for better communication and connection.

Please note: If you would like some assistance developing a budget and working to steward your money well, please contact us at Living Word. One of our pastors would be happy to walk you through creating a budget and managing your money in line with biblical principles.



Disconnection and the Family of God

When you think of public health crises, you probably think of smoking, or poor diets, or natural disasters. But have you ever thought of loneliness as a public health crisis? Researchers are finding out more and more that loneliness actually affects our health. Even before the pandemic, growing numbers of Americans—especially older Americans—described themselves as lacking friends. Even though social media and technology promised to make us more connected than ever, our virtual relationships aren't often tied to in-person relationships, and they only make us feel lonelier!

But when we become Christians, we belong to a family. It doesn't matter what our biological family or family of origin is like. God wants his children to be a functional family. So much of scripture focuses on the way those who follow Christ are meant to treat each other. (And you'll read more about those passages in week 2 of this booklet.) God wants us to be shaped into a new community, where we are known and loved, and where Christ is represented well.

It doesn't matter what your family looks like. Married or unmarried, divorced or single, parenting or struggling with infertility, struggling or happy, all are welcomed into the family of God. Here is the place where we meet God in community, where we are bound together in common belief and common mission. Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her. Jeremy Treat, a pastor from California, writes, "Community is not an optional bonus for people of faith. The Cross is a community-creating event, at once redeeming us from our sins and making us a people bound together by grace."

Pray that, through God's grace, Living Word Community Church can be a place where the lonely are welcomed and find community in Christ. Pray that we will be the type of community where we find common identity and purpose in Jesus. Pray that we would demonstrate that love and sense of community to those around us.

The Importance of Boundaries

Loving your family member may mean setting boundaries. If you are in an unhealthy relationship, the most loving thing you can do is set boundaries to try and stop the unhealthy behavior. If you say nothing, the behavior will continue.

We had a situation with a close family member. For many decades we put up with a lot of unhealthy behaviors because we did not think it was honoring to do more than take what was dished out. We tended to pull away from the relationship because it was often unpleasant. During one holiday, it got extremely bad, and we had to ask them to leave our house.

My mental health was suffering because of this person's actions. We agreed to go to a therapist to try and mend the relationship. The therapist said that it is not honoring them to enable that type of behavior by being silent. This family member was willing to change because the relationship was pretty much broken at that point, and it would have ended completely if change didn't happen.

In getting counsel and setting boundaries, the relationship improved greatly. We no longer allowed the behavior that caused the relationship to be unhealthy. We should not have waited so long to do it. After our counseling, it was much more pleasant to be around this person. Holidays and family events were more peaceful and enjoyable. We began to have a more genuine relationship rather than one that was just out of obligation.

Dalva Sterner



Philippians 2:1-5

Scripture is full of verses we call the “one anothers.” These verses direct us in how we are to treat and feel about one another. They are excellent guides for getting along in families—whether your “one another” is a spouse, sibling, parent, co-parent, or your brothers and sisters in the family of God. The devotionals this week will focus on a few of these “one another” verses and how we can apply them in our current situations.

The apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians to thank them for a gift (*perhaps money or food*) that they had sent to him while he was in prison. The book is generally a positive book, but it does seem there was some sort of disagreement brewing at the church at Philippi. It seems there was a conflict between two women in the early church community, so Paul encouraged them to be unified through humility.

It isn't always easy to be humble. Sometimes when we are in a conflict with someone (*especially those close to us, like our spouses and family members!*) we dig in our heels. We don't want to be wrong. We want to prove our point. The last thing we would want to do is put someone else's needs first or downplay our own ambition!

But that is exactly what Paul tells the Philippians (and us!) that they need to do. We follow Christ's example and humble ourselves. Paul is deeply concerned with unity in the family of God. How concerned are we with unity in our families?

How can you humble yourself this week and put somebody else's needs above your own?

One Another

week 2
DAY 2

Ephesians 4:1-6

Ephesians was a letter written by Paul to the church in the city of Ephesus. Ephesus was a famous city, a center for trade and commerce, filled with many monuments and temples. Paul doesn't seem to be writing to correct some bad theology or settle a disagreement, as he does in other letters in the New Testament. Instead, he is writing to encourage the Ephesian Christians. Unity is one of his major themes. In the opening verses of chapter 4, he is addressing unity and maturity in the body of Christ. He wants Christians to live out their calling in the community. He instructs his readers to, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."

Who in your family could use your patience? In the hustle and bustle of our busy day-to-day lives, it is easy to toss patience to the side. Perhaps you express frustration with your spouse for not figuring something out quickly enough? You raise your voice at your children when they take too long getting ready for school. You are quick to express your displeasure with a sibling who makes different choices than you.

But Paul is concerned with unity. And he is concerned with keeping the family of God knitted together in unity.

Do you have the same urgency for unity as Paul? How patient are you with those around you? Ask God to help you become a more patient person this week.



Colossians 3:12-14

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. (Colossians 3:12-14, MSG)

What is the first thing you put on each morning? Each day when I get up, I remember to clothe myself with a variety of things. I usually put on my watch first, and my shoes are the last thing I put on before I make my way out the door. But Paul isn't writing about shoes, or watches, or undershirts. He wants us to clothe ourselves with more important qualities: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. He wants us to—once again—have patience with those around us, even when they're annoying. And love, of course, is the all-purpose garment that wraps up everything else.

Today, we jump to another of Paul's letters, written to those in the church at Colossae. Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter, most likely in Rome. Paul writes, again, to encourage the Christians in their faith. In chapter 3, he reminds his readers that they are people who have been made alive in Christ, and they ought to act like it!

How could these qualities transform your family? What would be different if you remembered to put on compassion and kindness just the way you remember your socks? What if love was the final garment that you wrapped yourself in? How might that transform your marriage? Your relationship with your parents? The way you treat your children?

One Another

week 2
DAY 4

1 Corinthians 13

If you have ever attended a wedding, you've probably heard 1 Corinthians 13 being read. There is a reason that it makes for such a beautiful reading at weddings. But 1 Corinthians 13 isn't about the love between a husband and a wife, it is about the love that we are all supposed to have for one another. Paul isn't writing rules for marriages, but rules for relationships of all kinds. Listen to how these verses sound in *The Message* paraphrase of the Bible:

Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, Doesn't have a swelled head, Doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first," Doesn't fly off the handle, Doesn't keep score of the sins of others, Doesn't revel when others grovel, Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end.

What if those were the principles you put to work in your family? What if you didn't keep a record of wrongs with your siblings? What if you didn't give up on those you find difficult? What if you didn't fly off the handle with your kids? What if you looked for the best in your spouse?

Try an experiment this week. Carry the verses of 1 Corinthians 13 around with you or put them in a spot where you can see them. Hang them on your refrigerator. Make them the lock screen on your phone. Hang them on your bathroom mirror. Make them the goal for all of your interactions this week. At the end of the week, think back. How did this experiment change things for you? What was different?

The Fruits of the Spirit

Each year, I plant my vegetable garden with really good intentions. I prepare the soil, start my seeds, build supports for my tomatoes, and supply trellises for my cucumbers. But sometimes I lose enthusiasm somewhere in the summer. I don't weed as much as I should. Sometimes I forget to water. I don't prune the vines. And I don't keep an eye out for bugs or diseases.

Galatians 5:22-23 describes the incredible fruits that grow in our lives when we live lives in the Spirit. These fruits don't magically appear. Like the fruits we might attempt to grow in our little backyard gardens, they require some intentional acts on our parts.

Do you want love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control to be evident in your family? Wouldn't it be incredible if these were the markers for which our families are known?

These fruits are the work of the Holy Spirit. We cultivate the soil, we watch out for the weeds that can overtake the good work that God is doing, but the ultimate work belongs to God.

What "pruning" needs to be done in your life for the fruits of the Spirit to be evident in you? In your home? In your relationships? Pray that these character traits will mark your relationships.

LEARNING WISDOM FROM OUR FAMILIES

My Grandma Lloyd taught me that family members can disagree but cannot hold a grudge—we must forgive and remain united. Family unity is based on our ability and willingness to forgive each other. I believe this helped me work through my pain and grief to a place of forgiveness when grandma took her own life. God helped me remember grandma for all the good choices she made in her life and not her final one. I was able to focus on how she lived and not how she died. A final act does not define a lifelong legacy of love, forgiveness, and unity.

I also learned great lessons from my mom. My mom was very proactive about reaching out to serve others in practical ways and had no problem engaging people in conversation. She worked at Giant grocery store and made that her mission field. She would offer to take people for groceries or doctor appointments when she saw they had to use public transportation. She also was a support for her sister-in-law and a couple of friends for many years, helping them remain independent and stay in their homes rather than go into assisted living facilities.



My mom quietly gave of herself many times to family and friends as well. She gave away more in this life than she ever took and loved every minute of it! Mom was a Joyful Giver and lived each day to the fullest. The value of sacrificial giving is a huge part of the legacy mom left to those who knew and loved her.



I am so blessed to have had these two amazing women invest in helping to shape me into the person I am today. I am eternally grateful to God for the gift of my mom and grandma.

Salinda Weary

week 3 DAY 1

Marriage

Ephesians 5:21-33



Ephesians 5 describes a marriage of mutual submission and trust. These verses encourage wives and husbands to submit to one another. Each person in a marriage serves the other. They put their spouse's needs first.

Timothy and Kathy Keller, in their book *The Meaning of Marriage*, write, "...[E]ach partner is called to sacrifice for the other in far-reaching ways. Whether we are husband or wife, we are not to live for ourselves but for the other. And that is the hardest yet single most important function of being a husband or a wife in marriage."

There is something of a mystery in two people submitting to one another. If you know that the other person truly has your best interests at heart, submission is easy. But if you can't trust that your partner is really putting you first, submission feels risky and unsafe. The Kellers go on to write, "You can offer to serve the other with joy, you can make the offer with coldness or resentment, or you can selfishly insist on your own way. Only when both partners are regularly responding to one another in the first way can the marriage thrive. But how hard that is!"


Can you imagine what this might look like in practice? It makes me think of *The Gift of the Magi*, a short story written by O. Henry and published in 1905. In the story, a newly married couple is shopping for Christmas gifts for each other. The husband has a pocket watch that is his pride and joy, and the wife is known for her beautiful hair. The wife sells her hair to buy a chain for her husband's pocket watch, and the husband sells his watch to buy a comb to decorate his wife's hair! Each sacrificed the thing they loved in order to give a gift to the other.

How can you serve your partner this week?
How can you put their needs above your own?

Emotional Intelligence

There are a variety of excellent resources on marriage out there. One of my very favorite resources is a place called The Gottman Institute. They write, “We understand that the human family is in crisis, and that all individuals are capable of and deserve compassion. It is our mission to reach out to families in order to help create and maintain greater love and health in relationships.” Dr. John Gottman is a researcher who has studied relationships and offers practical advice for marriages, families, and parents. Though Gottman is not explicitly Christian, the studies and materials the institute produces often align with biblical values.

Dr. Gottman wrote a book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, which offers practical tips for husbands and wives. Over the years, Gottman has become known for being able to predict divorce just by listening to couples interacting for a short amount of time. He writes, “The more emotionally intelligent a couple—the better they are to understand, honor, and respect each other and their marriage—the more likely that they will indeed live happily ever after.” Thankfully, emotional intelligence is something that can be learned. And those “one another” passages we studied last week provide a good foundation for honoring, understanding, and respecting your partner.



Dr. Gottman writes that the heart of a good marriage is friendship: a deep respect and enjoyment of your partner. Reread the verses from Ephesians that we covered yesterday. What can you do today to be a better friend to your spouse? What do you respect about them? How can you express gratitude to them today?

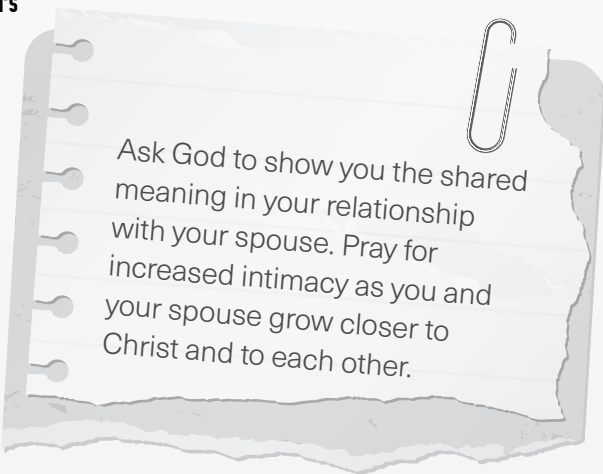
Shared Goals

Yesterday, I wrote a bit about one of my favorite sources for sound marriage advice: The Gottman Institute. In Dr. John Gottman's book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, he writes about the importance of shared meaning. Again, Gottman is not working from an explicitly Christian basis, but his work emphasizes shared meaning in a relationship. For Christians, that meaning comes from our relationship with Christ.

Gottman writes, "Not only will you increase the intimacy of your marriage by sharing your deepest objectives with your spouse, but to the extent that you work together to achieve shared goals, they can be a path toward making your union even richer."

Perhaps you and your spouse can sit down and do the following spiritual audit together:

- Do we share a goal to become closer to Christ?
- Do we strive together to become better Christians?
- Do we support one another in our spiritual goals?
- Do we provide accountability for one another in our relationships with Christ?
- Do we help one another to find time for spiritual disciplines?
- Do we have reminders in our home of the faith we share?
- What changes can we make to help one another in our spiritual lives?



Ask God to show you the shared meaning in your relationship with your spouse. Pray for increased intimacy as you and your spouse grow closer to Christ and to each other.

Marriage

week 3
DAY 4

God's Plan for Marriage (Genesis 1 & 2)

Have you ever wondered what marriage is even for? Romantic comedies and love songs seem to suggest that we marry someone to make us happy, or to find some sort of fulfillment, or our other half. Scripture, however, doesn't say anything like that. In the creation account, God pronounces that all of his creations are good. However, he says that it is *not* good for man to be alone.

We need human companionship. It isn't good for us to be without it. For some of us—but not all—that means we will seek companionship in marriage. And when joining someone in marriage, God glues us together in a *covenant*. A covenant is a binding relationship. It means that you are choosing this person, through thick and thin, for better or for worse.

But entering into a marriage covenant doesn't magically change you. Marriage doesn't change your base nature. You're a sinful person before you say "I do" and you remain a sinful person after. You're selfish. You don't think of others. You always think you're right. Marriage will not change this about you. But marriage can become a wonderful workshop where God changes you. The beauty of the marriage covenant is that you and your spouse are committed, despite your individual flaws and failures.

How committed are you to the covenant of your marriage?
When you first wed, did you consider the depth of the promise you were making? Ask God to help you renew your commitment to your spouse.

Family Comes in Many Shapes and Sizes

This week we have mostly focused on the unique commitment and covenant we make when we enter into a marriage. But, of course, families come in all shapes and sizes. The apostle Paul, for example, never married, despite writing some of the letters giving the best Christian marriage advice! Some Christians choose to go through life single because it allows them to better serve the Church. And for some, you are living a life of singleness that you never expected.

Scripture, as we have seen this week, has much to say about marriage. But it has much, much more to say about the family of God. God is primarily concerned with creating a new community with Christ at the center. Yes, God wants us to be better parents and spouses and siblings, but he wants us to be deeply committed to the family of God. To our local church family. To the fellow Christians with whom we spend so much of our lives.

The need for mutual submission and trust is also needed as we build up our local church. We are in need of Christian brothers and sisters who will lead with emotional intelligence. As a church family, we create shared meaning and goals when we meet together. So much of the advice given to couples is also applicable to how we all live together in community.

The family of God is messy. You might feel like your family of origin is a mess, and sometimes it seems like the local church isn't much better!

It is easy to complain and point out faults. But have you considered leading with humility, loving without judgment, serving without an agenda? How would behavior like that change the family of God?

TRUSTING GOD IN INFERTILITY

I thought maybe I misheard the doctor as he apathetically uttered the dreaded words, “There is no heartbeat.” The wind was knocked out of me, and I just sat there, shocked. This couldn’t be true. Not after enduring so much, both physically and mentally for so long, to start our family. Not after being so excited to finally see the two pink lines on the positive pregnancy test. Why would God give us this gift, then take it away so quickly?

The journey of infertility and pregnancy loss, which my husband and I went through for years, is raw and painful. Many times, I sat in front of God and laid my anger and pain at his feet, crying out to him in frustration, begging for mercy. Waiting on God’s timing wasn’t easy. The enemy wanted me to believe that I was all alone in this struggle and, unfortunately, I often bought into his lie.

But God is IN the waiting. He is faithful and just and longs to give us the desires of our hearts. He gently and consistently reminded me to put my trust in him and allow him to work in my heart during this difficult time. I had to choose to allow God to refine me like gold. To draw closer to him and allow him to fill me with his ever-present spirit. It was a daily choice, sometimes hourly, to hand God control over this part of my life (*which was never really in my control to begin with*).

Some things that helped me through this journey:



- **Journal and pray.** I didn’t dismiss my anger, pain, and loss. I allowed myself to feel it and talked to God about it, knowing he’s big enough to handle it all. I also found it therapeutic to journal my feelings, prayers, songs, and scriptures.
- **Find community.** I found a support system of family and friends to walk alongside me. I found it especially helpful to connect with those who had experienced this same struggle.
- **Keep hope in your pocket!** I placed hope-filled scripture verses in my pocket, so that any time I was tempted to fall into despair, God’s word was there for me. Here are some of my favorites: Romans 15:13, 2 Chronicles 20:9, and Romans 8:26-28 (*Do yourself a favor, and read this one from The Message.*)

Jarell Newcomer

The State of Parenting

Parenting is complicated in even the best of times, but the past few years have been especially stressful for parents. Pandemic disruption led to many of us spending perhaps more time with our children than we really expected to. Some of us were juggling virtual schooling or homeschooling while we attempted to work as well. Childcare and extracurriculars were disrupted, changed, or canceled altogether. It's been stressful, to say the least.

Changing generations bring changing parenting styles. Few of us parent in the same way that our grandparents would have parented. As knowledge about emotional intelligence, children's development, and mental health awareness has grown, our parenting styles have changed.

Technology has introduced many gadgets and apps that save us time, but has also introduced stressful new realities for our kids. And while social media allows us to keep in touch with family and friends, it also leads to higher incidences of bullying, increased pressure around body image (especially for girls), exposure to things we don't want our kids to see, and pressure on kids to make their lives look better to project an image to their followers.

The makeup of our families is also changing. According to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 70.1% of U.S. kids under age 18 live with two parents, 21.4% live with their mother, 4.4% live with their dad, and 4.0% live with someone other than their parents. And when it comes to kids growing up in a two-parent home, 4.4% of those parents are unmarried.

While some aspects of parenting have shifted, there are some bedrock things that do not change. God has chosen you to be the mother or father of your children and he is equipping you for the task. Though culture changes and shifts, God remains steadfast.

No matter what the situation, you can trust him with your children. He is the ultimate good parent, who loves and leads your family no matter the culture of the day.

The Ways Culture is Shaping Your Kids

Begin by reading Romans 12:2.

Culture is not only shaping your children, it has also shaped you. Don't see this as a you vs. your children problem. We all live in a world that constantly conforms us to its ways. However, children and teens are highly susceptible to that culture—and it never stops coming at them through their phones. Here are some cultural messages that shape your children every day.

The individual is sovereign and supreme. Only you can decide what is good and right for you. No one else (*including parents*) can make that decision. The individual has full freedom to choose how to live, what to believe and value, where to belong, and who they are (*identity*).

This message is applied especially to sexuality. Each person has full freedom to be as sexually experimental and involved as they want to be. Their body belongs to them. They can choose. Sex is a recreational pastime that does not require love or commitment.

Christianity is outdated, repressive, and makes no sense in a scientific world. That message gets louder and stronger through the teen years, and in the college years it is loudest of all.

Success is all important. Success is defined in terms of image, pleasures, possessions, experiences, the crowd to which you belong, and the attention you receive. In this culture, there are a few winners and a lot more losers.

You will spend a great amount of time as a parent. You need to get smart as a parent and that means you must read good resources. Read *The Tech-Wise Family* by Andy Crouch. *iGen* by Jean Twenge has outstanding insight about what the world is doing to your kids. *Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles* by Paul Tripp shows how transformation takes place.



What Do Kids Need?

I remember walking through the store while pregnant with my first child, overwhelmed at the sheer amount of stuff. Some of it seemed silly (*do I really need that plastic tube that sucks out the contents of my baby's nose?!*), some of it seemed complicated (*car seat instruction manuals are no joke!*), but I wasn't sure what was necessary. I didn't know what a baby really needed.

Though I am a little further along in my parenting journey than I was then, we can still be overwhelmed by wondering what our kids truly need. Thankfully, both scripture and mental health experts paint a pretty clear picture of what our kids need.

Kids need to feel safe. Kids need a home and family that feels like a safe refuge. They need to feel secure in their family. Are you a safe resource for your children? Can they be truly honest with you about how they are feeling? Do they know that you love them unconditionally? Do you allow them to be themselves without risk?

Kids need to feel seen. Our kids need to know that we really see them and care about the things that are important to them. How good are you at listening to your kids? Do you know what they value most? Do you express interest in the things that are important to them?

Kids need Jesus. Our children look to us to demonstrate what a relationship with God looks like. So much of passing on our faith is "caught not taught." Do your kids see you pray? Do they know that you depend on God when times are good and bad? Do you take them to church? Do they understand how important faith is in your life?

Pray that God would show you what your kids need and give you the ability to make them feel safe and seen. Prioritize teaching them about faith by modeling its importance in your own life.

Discipling Your Kids

Begin by reading Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

As a parent, I often feel like the day passes by in a flurry of meals, car rides, errands, drop-offs, pick-ups, bus stops, grocery runs, work calls, emails, and laundry. We want to teach our children about Jesus; we want to build up kids who find their identity in Christ and know to turn to him when things get rough, but we might not know where to begin.

Perhaps the most important way that we disciple our kids is by freely showing them how important our own faith is to us. We may not realize it, but our kids are always watching us. Author Tim Walker writes, “They are watching to see if we really believe what we say. They are looking to see . . .

What it means to trust God when life gets challenging.

What it means to love or show kindness.

What it means to forgive.

What it means to have faith in something bigger than ourselves.”

The verses in Deuteronomy offer a good framework for discipling our children. God commanded that his people, the Israelites, would pass on their faith to their children. I particularly like how these verses say, “Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

We are to teach our kids about faith as we go about our days. God didn’t say, “Put everything on hold and teach your children about me for hours each day!” Few of us could pass on the faith that way. Instead, we integrate faith teaching into the fabric of our days.

These verses also emphasize tangible reminders of faith. How can you work tangible faith reminders into your home? Perhaps you can display Bible verses or crosses in your home. Maybe you can display a piece of art that reminds you of a beloved Bible story.

Parenting in Community

Yesterday, we looked at some ways to disciple your kids in the context of your day. While most of those tips focused on discipleship that you do alone, it is important to remember that parenting is not an activity that moms and dads have to do alone. God has blessed us with the gift of community! You are never alone as you seek to grow as a Christian parent.

The first resource available to you is, of course, Living Word Community Church. Our Next Gen ministry is filled with staff and ministry partners who love to teach children to love God and they want to help you in that journey. Many of our ministries have Facebook groups where they post discussion tips and activities that go along with that week's lessons.

Get to know the families that attend our church. You need other parents as a resource in your parenting journey. When you hit a tricky patch, it is always great to have another Christian parent that is only a text or call away. And it is great for your children to build relationships with families with shared values.

Parenting was never meant to be a solo journey. Our children need to see us as part of a vibrant, healthy faith community. Not only will this be a resource to you in your parenting, but a network of support for your children as well.

There are also great resources in the forms of websites, books, and apps. Check out the Parent Cue app, which is a companion to the teaching materials our Next Gen ministries use. The Parent Cue app and website is full of articles, discipleship materials, family activities, and podcasts to help you in your parenting journey.

Making Space

Almost 20 years ago, our family moved from Virginia back to Pennsylvania. During our years in Virginia, Kristen and I brought eight children into the world and, as our kids grew, we decided to move back to the York area where our extended families lived. This meant a new house, new work, new church, new schools—and eight kids who would need to adjust to all of this.

I'll never forget the evening we shared the news of our upcoming move with our kids. All ten of us were together in our living room. Six of our kids seemed to just be taking it all in—processing what it meant to live in a different place. All our children had sweet memories of visiting York County during our vacations.

Two of our daughters responded with lots of emotion. Lilya, 8, shouted for joy with her arms raised high, while Evelyn, 6, immediately burst into tears of deep sadness. Something Kristen and I realized right away was that we would need to make space gently and lovingly for all these emotions from our little ones. By the way, our kids that didn't have immediate reactions still had their own emotions and thoughts. Some of them needed some help from their parents, drawing them out, asking how they felt.

Our children are all grown now. As I write this, our youngest is turning 21. And now as young adults, our kids share openly about their struggles, dreams, hopes, and fears. We have done our best to make space for every voice. Sometimes the best ideas for how to live together as followers of Jesus has come from one of our children. Jesus famously made space for children to come to him in Matthew 19:14. As parents, we need to make space for them, and whatever is on their hearts, every day.

Aaron Kence



The State of Sexuality

Begin by reading Genesis 2:18-25, Proverbs 5:18-21, and 1 Corinthians 6:9-20.

Sexuality, whether good or gone wrong, is a central part of human life. The Bible talks of sex frequently. The Song of Solomon is about romantic love and sex. The Proverbs are explicit about the dangers of prostitution. Paul provides strong warnings about sexual immorality (see *Corinthians passage above*).

Sex and sexuality, romance and love—they are a part of life. They are beautiful in the way and context God intended. They became damaging out of that context. While our culture is by no means the first or the worst when it comes to the misuse and abuse of sex, we certainly rank up there. Here are some examples.

The pornography industry is massive, instantly and always available, and grows every week. The overall statistics are terrible. It is tragic how many children and teens see or use pornography. See the website Enough is Enough for information and for help.

Prostitution, teen prostitution, sex trafficking, global sex trade. . .

Rape (reported and not reported), molestation, child sexual abuse. . .

Sexual pressures, sexism, sexual assault in the workplace. . .

Nudity and semi-nudity is the new norm. . .

Sexually transmitted infections (*STIs or STDs*) proliferate. Twenty percent of our population has an STI, and every year, 50% of the new cases are among young people ages 15-24.

In 2020, there were 910,000 abortions to end unwanted pregnancies. This was a 3-year upward trend. Unmarried women had 86% of abortions and women in their 20's had 57% of abortions.

If you have been hurt by the broken state of sexuality in our culture, counseling may help you find healing and a better way through Christ.

Book Recommendation:

Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With? by Sam Allberry

The Meaning of Sex. Part 1

Begin by reading James 1:17.

The Creator God loves the world he created and loves humanity, who he made in his image. God, in love, gives us many gifts—including the gift of sexuality and sex. Here are a few biblical teachings on sex.

- **Sex is for intimacy and bonding. There is something mystical and spiritual; the two become one** (*Genesis 2:18, 24; Mark 10:6-9*).
- **Sex is an expression of love and commitment, and should be done as an act of love and in the way of love** (*1 Corinthians 13:4-8*).
- **Sex is for mutual giving that meets one another's needs** (*1 Corinthians 7:3-4*). This was unprecedented in the time it was written. In every other culture the man had control over the woman's body.
- **Sex is necessary and should not be denied to either husband or wife** (*1 Corinthians 7:5*).
- **Sex is stimulating, romantic, pleasurable, and enjoyable. This is assumed in the previous ideas and described in the Song of Solomon.**
- **Sex is also for procreation and establishing a family** (*Genesis 1:27-28*).
- **Sex should always be self-controlled** (*1 Thessalonians 4:3-8*).

Christians often ask, what is permissible for sex between married couples? In 1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23-24, Paul gives a principle of responsible freedom. If something is safe, not harmful, mutually affirmed, and never forced on an unwilling spouse, you have a good deal of freedom for sexual pleasure.

Thank God for giving you the good and perfect gift of sexuality. Pray for discernment on God's purposes for sex within marriage.



The Meaning of Sex. Part 2

There are core ideas that traditional Christian faith has always affirmed about sexuality. These beliefs are rejected by large parts of our culture. Even the words sound strange.

Chastity. This is keeping yourself from involvement in premarital sexuality. The idea is that sex before marriage is taking something away from your future spouse and hurting yourself emotionally and spiritually.

Monogamy. There are times in the Bible where you see a trajectory or a steady improvement. Monogamy (one spouse) has always been God's plan for marriage. At times, due to cultural problems, God made allowances for polygamy (multiple spouses). When there was a lack of men, an unmarried woman was at risk for severe poverty and prostitution. Politically, some of the kings of Israel has several wives. Even though it was permitted, it always led to other problems. But God's plan always moved his people toward monogamy.

Heterosexuality. The Judeo-Christian understanding of sexuality for thousands of years has been one man and one woman as God's ideal plan for marriage. Today, our political democracy says same-sex marriage is legal and our system gives people freedom of choice about marriage lifestyle. While Christians can and should hold to the biblical teaching on this, at the same time, we must be kind, compassionate, and loving toward those who adopt lifestyles alternative to our biblical beliefs. And pray the same treatment is given to us in return.

Fidelity. This is remaining emotionally and sexually faithful to your spouse. Adultery and affairs cause endless pain.

Celibacy. Sex is never a simple recreational pleasure. Sexuality is so sacred and powerful, that for those who are single, whether by choice or not, abstinence from sex is still God's will for them. Jesus was celibate. Paul eventually was as well.

{ *Read more of Paul's thoughts on being unmarried in 1 Corinthians 7:25-40.* }

Forgiveness and Healing

God created and gave sex as a good gift to be experienced and expressed in the context of a loving and faithful marriage. Outside that context, sex will not accomplish the good purpose for which God intends. Outside the context of marriage, sex has the possibility of doing great harm, even if that harm is not evident at first.

Sex involves the total person: body, emotions, thoughts, desires, longings, needs, the soul, and the spirit. C. S. Lewis said, the greater the good gift God created, the more terrible is its corruption. That is true for the very good gift of sex. Misused and abused, it causes great emotional, mental, and spiritual harm. We can sexually sin against others. We can do sexual evil to others. When we do, we still feel guilt and shame, even in our permissive culture.

The good news is that God is gracious, God forgives, God removes our sin from us, and God heals the broken heart and damaged soul. God restores dignity where it has been robbed. God restores the good gifts that have been harmed. God replaces shame with dignity and guilt with freedom. You can experience all of this if you have sinned. You can experience all of this if you have been sinned against. You can once again experience trust, respect, and love. It will take time and work. You will need help and guidance. But God's love is greater than evil.

Counseling may be a path God uses to bring healing and freedom into your life.

*Read and pray through these verses: Jeremiah 31:3-4;
Psalm 32:3-5, 103:14; 1 Peter 5:10; 1 John 1:8-10.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Bodies

*O*r didn't you realize that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit? Don't you see that you can't live however you please, squandering what God paid such a high price for? The physical part of you is not some piece of property belonging to the spiritual part of you. God owns the whole works. So let people see God in and through your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, MSG)

While sex is about more than just bodies, how we feel about our bodies is tied up in our sexuality. For centuries, we Christians have struggled with what to make of this thing we call our body. We put so much emphasis on our souls that we tend to diminish our bodies. We tend to think "Oh, it's just my body. It doesn't matter how I treat it. It doesn't matter how I take care of it, because it's just my body and God only cares about my soul."

If within the Church we tend to diminish our bodies, outside of it, culture tends to reduce us to our bodies. And culture would say since your body matters most, it must look perfect, and it must perform perfectly.

There will be times for all of us when we feel like our bodies don't measure up. Maybe it's in the way we look or what we weigh. Maybe it's in the way our bodies function or what we cannot do. We will all face physical limitations. Our bodies and their functioning will change as we age.

But scripture tells us that God fearfully made us, both body and soul. Your body was carefully planned and designed by God. And God says that it is good.

Take your body, no matter how you feel about it, no matter what your social media feed would say about it, and place it before God as an offering. Steward the gift of your body well.



**LET ALL
THAT YOU DO
BE DONE IN
LOVE.**

1 Corinthians 16:14

Divorce and Remarriage

Begin by reading 1 Corinthians 7 and Malachi 2:16.

Like so many of the daily reflections, this topic really needs a chapter or even a book about it. There are few things as painful as divorce. There are few things that have as much ongoing and damaging repercussions as divorce. It takes many years to regain lost ground when a divorce happens. The most cited reasons for divorce are: lack of commitment, infidelity, unresolved conflict, and financial problems.

God loves marriage and God is against divorce. God is also against loveless marriages and against abuse in marriage.

While there are different views about divorce, one major interpretation is that God allows divorce for the reasons of adultery, abuse, and abandonment because these actions violate the very nature of the marriage covenant of sacred love and care. These actions destroy the essence of marriage, even if the external form of it is still there. While God allows divorce in these instances, God does not mandate it. Adultery, abuse, and abandonment are serious and evil. Still, God is a God of grace. With genuine repentance, real forgiveness, the help of wise counsel, and a lot of hard work, restoration is possible. We have seen it happen many times.

While remarriage is possible, and most people will pursue it, any dating or pursuit of a serious relationship soon after divorce is unwise. You need time to heal and grow. Some studies report that 60% of second marriages end in divorce and 73% of third marriages do! You must wait and you must get counseling to work through the pain of divorce. When children are involved, a new relationship soon after divorce is very hard on them.

Work preventively against divorce by working proactively on building a strong marriage. Build a strong spiritual life and a regular church life. Couples who do this have stronger and happier marriages. If you are divorced, look to build healthy friendships at church. You need the right people in your life who will be a part of your journey.

All Kinds of Families


week 6
DAY 2

Singleness

For much of recent Christian history, we in the Church have tended to put a great deal of emphasis on the nuclear family: a father, a mother, and a few children. Sadly, we have not always done such a great job of integrating singles into the life of the Church. If you are single, you may have felt like something is wrong with you or that you are not as important as married people in the Church. If you are single and parenting, you may have felt further ostracized. If this describes your experience in the Church, I am deeply sorry for the pain you have felt.

Jesus, of course, was single. Paul was, too. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul actually says that it is better for people to remain unmarried. Of course, Paul had the strong ties of the early Church community, with its emphasis on breaking bread together and sharing possessions. If you are single, I encourage you to lean on your church community. Join a LifeGroup. Get involved in serving with others. Invite friends—single and married alike—into your world. Share with them your experience of singleness. Ask for help when you need it.

And for those of you reading this who are not single, show up for your single friends. Make sure they feel seen. Galatians 6:2 reminds us, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Do you carry the burdens of your single friends? Do you show up for them when they need a friend to listen, or an extra set of hands?



No matter our marital stage, together we are the body of Christ. We have each been called to differing life stages. For the good of the Church body, let's love one another well. Pray that God would help you see where you can help others who may be in a different life stage from your own.

Aging



*Even to your old age and gray hairs
I am he, I am he who will sustain you.
I have made you and I will carry you;
I will sustain you and I will rescue you.
(Isaiah 46:4)*

When I was a child, I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be a grownup person in their thirties! I couldn't conceive of ever being so ancient. What does someone that age even do all day? Of course, my perspective changed as I approached that milestone—and many others. As more of the U.S. population ages, our perspective of aging is shifting along with it.

If you were growing older in another country, it is most likely that you would be living with extended family. But America is unique in that, as we age, we most often live alone or with only a spouse. And recent research from Pew says, "Americans ages 60 and older are alone for more than half of their daily measured time." While aging can come with physical limitations and loneliness, aging can also be a source of great joy. We gain wisdom. We are given a more respected status as an elder. We have the privilege of leading those younger than us.

Your wisdom and experience are a wealth and resource to your church family. Titus 2 gives examples of older people in a church community intentionally mentoring younger believers.

Much of our experience of aging can be shaped by the perceptions we have about it. How do you feel about aging? Do you bring your concerns about aging to God? Have you asked God to put younger people into your life that you can mentor?

All Kinds of Families

week 6
DAY 4

Adoption and Hospitality

In Pennsylvania, there are around 15,000 children in foster care or awaiting adoption. Children belong in families. This isn't something that any one of us would debate. Scripture suggests that we learn about the goodness of God as our father by what we experience in our own families (*Matthew 7:9-11*). But for the hundreds of thousands of U.S. kids awaiting adoption, their experience of family is limited to the loss of their own biological family and the series of foster and care homes where they reside.

Scripture uses the language of adoption to describe all of God's children. In Ephesians 1, Paul writes that God "chose us in him," and verse five says that we are "adopted." Adoption is a beautiful way to describe what Jesus has done for us. In adoption, one is chosen to become part of a family that they weren't originally born into. In his book, *Adopted for Life*, Russell Moore writes, "The New Testament continually points to our adoption in Christ in order to show us that we're really, really wanted here in the Father's house. The Spirit is continually telling the people of Christ that they, we, are 'blessed' in Christ through adoption."

We can extend that same spirit of chosenness by supporting adoption in our community. Perhaps you are one of the many families looking to adopt. But even if you are not, you can support adoptive families through prayer, gifts of time and resources, and a listening ear.

Educate yourself on the needs of adopted children and families. Consider becoming a foster parent and providing for children moving in and out of care. Pray for the ways that God might be calling you to either adopt or support others doing so.

Managing Transitions in Families

Marriage, families, and relationships are always in flux. Some of us are single and end up married and some of us are married and end up single. Our children are always getting older. So are our parents. Our relationships with both shift as we age.

One thing you can be sure of in your marriage: the person you marry will change. Stanley Hauerwas, an ethics professor at Duke University, wrote, “The assumption is that there is someone just right for us to marry and that if we look closely enough we will find the right person. This moral assumption overlooks a crucial aspect to marriage. It fails to appreciate the fact that we always marry the wrong person. We never know who we marry; we just think we do. Or even if we first marry the right person, just give it a while and he or she will change. For marriage, being [the enormous thing it is] means we are not the same person after we have entered it. The primary problem is . . . learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married.”

Even though we know that families will go through a variety of transitions, we still find ourselves surprised when they do. We know that our parents are going to age and need care, but it is still painful to watch it happen. It is painful when our children approach adolescence and don’t adore us as they once did. The only thing that remains constant is change.

There is, of course, One who never changes, whose steady, abiding presence is the bedrock for us as we manage the changes in our lives.

How can you depend on God to sustain you in times of transition? Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. His steadfast love never ceases, even when the ground around you is shifting.

NOT THE BRADY BUNCH

When my husband and I got married, we each had a 10-year-old and a 13-year old. We were a regular “Brady Bunch”—only not so much. Real life is never like a sappy TV series.

Raising four children under the same roof was going to be challenging, so we read everything we could find on stepfamilies (*most helpful: The Smart Stepfamily by Ron Deal*). Even with preparation, there were days (*weeks, months*) when it was a struggle. These basic principles helped us keep it together.

First, my husband and I were a united front. So the kids couldn’t divide and conquer, we talked daily about any family concerns. If one of the kids needed to be spoken to, the biological parent did the talking, not the stepparent.

We prayed with and for our family regularly. Sometimes all we could do is encourage each other and say, “With God’s help, we’re going to get through this.” We were committed to making our marriage and family work. Giving up was not an option.

We held family meetings during our weekly pizza and movie night. Weekly chore lists were distributed. We tried to eat dinner together every night. Every Sunday we went to church together.

We created new memories together—visiting grandparents, going to amusement parks, making Christmas cookies, etc. We respected each other’s traditions and made compromises. These memories became our new family history.

We tried to discern stepfamily issues from teenager issues. (*“Did she slam that door because she hates being in a stepfamily or because she’s a 15-year-old or both?”*)

We put in the time because bonding doesn’t happen overnight. It took years, but when you hear that first “I love you” from a stepchild or receive a heart-felt card, it’s all worth it.

Nineteen years later, our kids are all adults now. They still speak to us and attend family get-togethers, so maybe we did something right. All we can say is that we did the best we could, with God’s help.

Lisa Long



Everyone Here Has Value in God's Eyes

When you're in a setting where you are beginning to question if someone has value, pause and pray. Declare it as a statement first: Everyone here has value in God's eyes. Then as a prayer:

"Lord, help me to see this person (or people) through your eyes, to hear them through your ears. Point out anywhere depravity (theirs or mine) is keeping me from seeing their dignity, acknowledging their worth in your eyes. Help me to call out dignity, so you may be glorified in my attitude and actions. For the cause of the Kingdom and the sake of Your glory. In Your name. Amen."



Connie Milderling

**GOD IS PART OF EACH AND
EVERY STORY. HE IS WITH
YOU AND HE IS FOR YOU.**





LIVING WORD
COMMUNITY CHURCH