



**USING THE HOLIDAYS TO
TEACH OUR CHILDREN THE GOSPEL**

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INTRODUCTION

What a happy, life-altering, exhausting, and intimidating thing it is to be a parent of small children.

There are moments of undeniable joy and laughter—holding your newborn, hearing him laugh for the first time, singing to her, teaching him to walk, experiencing her first words. Who doesn't have fond memories of their child saying, "I love you mommy" or "Hold me Da-Da"? Who can forget the first time their small child discovered how to open the baby powder on his own, dug through her mother's pocketbook without her knowledge, or bit into a slice of lemon unawares?

But joy and laughter are not the only thing our children "bring to the table." They—toddlers especially—also alter our lives in ways we could not have easily imagined. Never in my wildest dreams did we think we'd know this much about Dora the Explorer. Little did we know that we would spend a third of our time as "toddler parents," touching things in our house and wondering why they're so sticky. Nor did we know we'd spend the other two-thirds scraping goldfish off the car seats and exaggerating our enthusiasm about little Junior's latest offering on the potty.

So little kids are little bundles of joy who alter our lives. But they are also exhausting. "Everyone should have kids," Ray Romano once said. "They are the greatest joy in the world. But they are also terrorists. You'll realize this as soon as they are born, and they start using sleep deprivation to break you." In fact, as I (Bruce) have observed my wife's devotion to our small children, I've concluded that mothers of small children are guinea pigs in a grand sociological experiment to show that sleep is not necessary to human existence.

And then, on top of all of this happiness, life-reorganization, and exhaustion, there is the intimidation factor. Who among us—in the realm of small-child-parentdom—hasn't recognized the pressure involved in being a role model for our young children? We are often reminded of our own shortcomings and of the fact that our small children will very soon be big children and then, after that, no longer children at all.

One of the most significant reminders of our shortcomings is the fact that children are natural mimics who act like us—their parents—despite our fervent efforts to teach them a good attitude and good manners. They have extraordinarily good memories; in fact, they easily repeat word-for-word what we shouldn't have said.

Happy. Life-altering. Exhausting. Intimidating. But also receptive. Children are little sponges who are ready to absorb what we teach them. They stand ready each day to receive in their memory banks the deposits we will make.

Their receptivity is something upon which we should capitalize, and some of the most ordinary or regular moments in the parenting calendar provide a great opportunity to do so. One of the ways we capitalize upon their receptivity is to use annual holidays (which tend to be exciting for small children) as special moments to teach our children about Christ and his gospel.

That is the thesis of this little book, that the annual calendar provides a wonderful opportunity to shape our children's hearts and lives. We hope that you find it helpful, from one parent to another.

-Bruce and Lauren Ashford

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 5 Chapter 1** A Dozen (or So) Things We Will Never Regret Doing with Our Kids
- 12 Chapter 2** Three Essential Things Parents Should Share with Their Kids on New Year's Day
- 16 Chapter 3** Three Things We Teach Our Children While Watching the Super Bowl
- 21 Chapter 4** Valentine's Day: Parents, Teach Your Children About Different Types of Love
- 24 Chapter 5** What's so 'Good' about Good Friday?
- 27 Chapter 6** Jesus and Easter: Why the Resurrection is the Most Important Truth in the World
- 31 Chapter 7** Mother's Day: God Loves You Like a Mother (Not Just as a Father)
- 34 Chapter 8** Father's Day: To Anybody Who Thinks an Imperfect Man Can't Be a Great Father
- 37 Chapter 9** Three Essential Things Parents Should Share with Their Kids About Christmas
- 40 About the Authors**

CHAPTER 1

A DOZEN (OR SO) THINGS WE WILL NEVER REGRET DOING WITH OUR KIDS

Like most mothers and fathers, we are acutely aware of our own flaws and shortcomings as parents. Compounding the problem, we are facing the fact that our small children will soon be adolescents and, before we're ready for it, they'll be grown and off on their own. So, in light of how precious our children are, and how short our time with them will be, we sat down to write out the things most important for us to do with our children. In other words, the things we will never regret doing with our kids. Here is our list:

1. READING TO THEM

When our family has “down time” at the house, we are often tempted to let them watch television. But, in retrospect, we are happiest when we resist that temptation and instead read to them. The most important thing we read is the Bible. There is absolutely no substitute for our children hearing their parents read the Bible and talk with them about it. But we read other things also, such as the Little House on the Prairie series, National Geographic magazines, children's biographies, and children's fiction. Reading helps us to expand our children's horizons, expose them to other people's lives and experiences, increase their vocabularies, and stimulate discussion.

2. PRAYING FOR THEM

Children need to hear their father and mother praying with

them and for them. No time is a bad time to pray with our children. But there are two times we find especially conducive to praying with our children: dinner time and bedtime. At dinner, there is no set pattern for who prays. It might be one of the parents, one of the children, all of the children, or the whole family. But it is a great time to be thankful together, to talk with God together. At bedtime, we have the happy opportunity to pray with each child individually, listening to their concerns and watching their little minds whirl as they try to communicate with God.

3. WORKING WITH THEM

Children need their parents to work with them and alongside of them. One way to do this is to assist them with their work such as homework assignments or extracurricular projects. Another way to do this is to ask them to help us with our work. One of my (Bruce's) best recent memories is watching my six-year old daughter go "all in" to help me plant 50-60 flowers in our front yard; she had potting soil on her hands, in her hair, on her cheeks, and even in her socks. She was flush in the face with happiness that she had actually helped daddy with a real outdoor project. A final way is to assign chores that they can complete while we complete our own tasks.

4. PLAYING WITH THEM

We don't play with our children often enough. But when we do, we are happy we did, even if play time cuts into our other tasks or our own personal time. I (Lauren) have realized that my four-year-old son likes to play with race cars and rescue vehicles when he is with me, while the girls want to play dress up, arts and crafts, or Legos. When they are with Bruce, they like to play some of the

same things, but they also want him to get on the floor to wrestle and tickle them. Sometimes we play with a child individually, getting down on the floor to play with cars or to play “house.” Other times, we play together as a family. It doesn’t matter so much what we play; it matters that we play. Playing together not only helps us to bond; it gives us happy memories to share for years to come.

5. TALKING WITH THEM AT THE DINNER TABLE

Research confirms and illumines what people have always known intuitively, that dinner time conversation is immensely profitable for children. It boosts their vocabulary, improves their school grades, makes them healthier, decreases their chances of clinical depression, and strengthens the bond with their parents and siblings. Fortunately, it can also be a lot of fun for the parents. In fact, dinner time is one of our favorite times of the day.

In addition to sharing a meal and having informal conversation, we usually play conversation games with our children: “What was the best part of your day? The worst? What is the most interesting thing you learned at school?” Now, it doesn’t always work out like we planned. Sometimes the primary thing they want to discuss is what we’ll have for dessert. But it is a crucial part of the day, and we don’t want to miss it. (We feel constrained to say that dinner table conversation didn’t, er, work out so well when our children were under the age of 4.)

6. HAVING “FAMILY TIME” AFTER DINNER

We usually have dinner between 5 and 6 p.m. Right after that, we clean up the kitchen, brush teeth, and put on PJs. By 7 p.m. or so, we are ready to sit down for “family time.” We always read the Bible and pray together, and sometimes we act out the Bible sto-

ries (believe me, it is worth your time to act them out, and even more worth your time to record it on video). We almost always play some sort of game together, such as charades or hide-and-seek (our kids are still small). It is a great time to be serious and silly together.

We work hard to ensure that other things don't cut out family time, even though other responsibilities (and parental exhaustion!) mean that we usually manage to have family time only 4-5 times per week. Even if there are dirty dishes, dirty clothes, and dirty bathrooms waiting to be cleaned, we want to guard our family time. There will always be chores to do, but there will not always be moments like these when we can lay the foundations for their adolescent and adult years.



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7. TUCKING THEM IN AT BEDTIME

Whereas the dinner table and family time help the family to bond as a whole, bedtime offers some one-on-one time. We've found that it is always a good time to tell the kids we love them, to kiss their cheeks, pray for them, and to make some small talk. And we've found that sometimes, the kids want to open up to talk about more important things.

8. TAKING THEM OUT FOR "MOMMY-DAUGHTER DATES" OR "MAN-TIME"

One of the most profitable things we've ever done is spend one-on-one time with the children. I (Lauren) am able to do this at

home, but sometimes I take the girls out for a meal or dessert. I (Lauren) might take my son out for pancakes or my daughters out to get their nails painted. Bruce likes to take our son out for “man-time” to Home Depot (to stare at tools and machines) and our daughters out for “daddy-daughter dates” (to eat dinner and dessert). These times are treasured and irreplaceable moments of one-on-one interaction, going even deeper than we can during bedtime conversation. Bruce uses this to build them up and encourage them, but also to talk with them about things they need to work on (such as their, um, attitudes).

9. TELLING THEM WE LOVE THEM

Every day, we try to slow down and hit “pause” long enough to look each child in the eyes and tell them that we love them. That we will always love them. Whether they obey or disobey. Whether they succeed at a task or fail at it. No matter what. We will always love them. Our children know that this is meaningful; we hope it will be etched in their memories and remind them of God’s love.

10. DISCIPLINING THEM

As much patience and emotional energy as it takes to discipline our children consistently (and as often as we fail to do so), we know it is very important for their future well-being. We want to steer them away from sinful desires and toward their need for God. We are especially concerned to discipline them for lying, disobedience, and disrespect. Through the discomfort a child experiences when they are disciplined, they might be persuaded to refrain from sin in the future when the consequences of sin will be much more painful. We know that if we can discipline them consistently and lovingly—reminding them that we love them no

matter what they do or don't do—we will never regret it.

11. AFFIRMING OUR CHILDREN

As often as we can, we try to articulate to each child the things we recognize in them, including their unique personalities, gifts, and abilities. Sometimes we follow that up by also pointing out some of the unique challenges they face given their particular personalities and sin patterns. This can be done at bedtime, during one-on-one time, or, sometimes, even when the whole family is together.

12. AFFIRMING EACH OTHER IN FRONT OF OUR CHILDREN

Children benefit greatly from knowing their parents love and respect each other. We find ways during the week to emphasize that fact. We say “I love you” to each other, hug each other, and compliment each other. We try not to call each other out or argue in front of them, but if we do, we make sure to let them also hear us reconciling. It helps them feel safe and secure and stable.

13. BRINGING THEM INTO THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS

We like what our children learn at church. They learn Bible stories and truths at church that we haven't yet taught them at home. They learn to love God in a room full of people, many of whom are different from us economically, socially, culturally, or racially. They build friendships that will encourage them in their walk with Jesus. At church, they learn who God is, who they are, what went wrong with the world, who will fix the world, and how they can be a part of the greatest story of all—God redeeming humanity and restoring the world.

14. REMINDING THEM OF THE GOSPEL

We want to find as many ways as possible to remind them of the gospel. The gospel is the announcement that Jesus Christ's birth, teaching, miracles, death, and resurrection give us a glimpse of, and opens up to us, God's coming Kingdom. Jesus will return one day to overthrow evil and establish his perfect kingdom for eternity. The gospel calls for us to believe in Christ, trust Christ, and repent of our sins; if we obey this call, we will live with him eternally in his Kingdom.

The beauty of the gospel is that Jesus "traded places" with us. He lived the sinless life that we should have lived, and died the death that we deserve to die. He took our guilty record, died for it, and offers us his perfect record in return. That is why the apostle Paul declared that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

In relation to parenting, that means that he does not condemn us for our flaws and shortcomings as parents. We—Bruce and Lauren—are often made aware of our imperfections as parents. (We're not even consistent with these "dozen things we will never regret doing." Schedules change at the last minute. Children get sick. Parents get tired. Et cetera.) So we put our trust in him, rather than in ourselves, as we try to make the most of these moments before our small children become adolescents. Because, before we're ready for it, they'll mature into young adults and go off on their own.

A version of this chapter originally published at *BruceAshford.net*.

CHAPTER 2

THREE ESSENTIAL THINGS PARENTS SHOULD SHARE WITH THEIR KIDS ON NEW YEAR'S DAY

In late December, we hear the “Auld Lang Syne” music loop at the local coffee shop. We see discounted post-Christmas merchandise at Kohl’s. We find ourselves preparing for New Year’s Eve dinners and parties, going to parades and city square celebrations, and looking forward to football games and finger food.

More than anything, however, we get a sense that the past year has gone by very quickly. We are reminded again that time flies, and that the upcoming year will go by quickly as well. So we make resolutions because we want to do good and purposeful things during the new year. In other words, the New Year’s holiday causes us to “hit pause” in order to gain perspective on what we are doing with our lives.

In the midst of all this, many of us are trying to discern how to teach our children about why New Year’s matters. Let’s be honest, it feels easier to share the meaning of Christmas than it does New Year’s. If Christmas teaches the depths of God’s love and encourages our children to pass along that love to others through generosity and sacrificial giving, what does New Year’s Day teach? Fortunately, it provides the opportunity to expand upon the lessons Christmas teaches as we:

1. LOOK BACK ON THE PAST YEAR IN LIGHT OF GOD’S GOOD GIFTS.

The Christmas story teaches us to be grateful that God would give us his Son some two millennia ago; New Year’s provides an opportunity for gratitude toward God’s goodness over the past

year. Even, and especially, if the past year has been full of disappointment, failure, and loss, the beginning of a new year is an irreplaceable opportunity to acknowledge the goodness in our lives.

How do we share this with our children? A natural gathering place for many families is the dinner table. For others, it might be bedtime. Either way, we can ask our children to recount the “good” things that have happened. One by one, we can thank God for those good things and even make a record of them for memory’s sake. Similarly, we can ask our children to articulate the things that were not so good, and attempt to put them into perspective.

2. LOOK FORWARD TO THE NEXT YEAR BY RESOLVING TO BE A CONDUIT OF GOD’S LOVE.

The Christmas story teaches us the penetrating and persistent nature of God’s sacrificial love. As Sally Lloyd Jones puts it in *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, Jesus’ love is a never-stopping, never-giving-up, unbreaking, always and forever love. His sacrificial love makes clear to our children that they don’t have to be “good” kids or winners for God to love them. God loves them no matter who they are.

The New Year’s tradition of making “resolutions” provides the perfect opportunity to follow up on this teaching about God’s generous and sacrificial love. A new year naturally causes us to think about what we want to do and who we want to become in the upcoming year. And the Bible teaches that the single most important thing a person can do is to love God and let our own lives be a conduit of his love for other people (Mark 12:30-31).

How do we apply this to our children’s little lives? We can encourage them to make goals for the upcoming year that focus on

loving other people more than perfecting themselves. Just as Mom and Dad can focus more on helping the homeless than they do on perfecting their abs at the gym, so the kids can focus more on being kind to the socially-awkward child in their class than on becoming a better gamer or rising higher in the popularity ranks at school.

3. LOOK UPWARD TO THE GOD WHO GIVES MEANING AND PURPOSE TO THE NEW YEAR.

The Christmas story teaches us that the God who came to visit us in a manger is also the God who created us and gives our lives meaning and purpose. The New Year's holiday can remind our children that the Bible's story not only begins with God creating the world, but continues with him sending his Son Jesus to save us from our sins and make us more like himself, and, finally, concludes with Jesus returning to institute a worldwide reign of love, peace, and justice.

How do we apply this story for our children? We instill in them that it is God who makes their New Year's resolutions especially



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meaningful. When they resolve to befriend the socially-awkward child rather than obsessing on being popular, they are partnering with Jesus in his never-stopping, never-giving-up, unbreaking, always and forever love. When they determine to give some of their hard-earned money to a charity that benefits financially disadvantaged persons, they are doing so in

expectation of a day when Jesus will return and abolish poverty altogether.

In other words, our children need more than mere resolutions. As helpful as resolutions can be, what children need even more is a story that makes sense of the resolutions and gives meaning and purpose to their lives. Well, the Bible's story is the greatest story of all and the New Year's holiday provides an opportune moment to show our children how their lives fit into that magnificent story.

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CHAPTER 3

THREE THINGS WE TEACH OUR CHILDREN WHILE WATCHING THE SUPER BOWL

When the Super Bowl commences in early February, millions of viewers will tune in to watch the two best teams in the NFL play for the coveted Vince Lombardi Trophy. For some fans, it is an opportunity to pull for their favorite team. For others, it is a chance to pull for an underdog against whoever-the-other-team-is. For still others, the Super Bowl serves as more of an exciting opportunity to consume enormous amounts of food while yelling at an inanimate object—the television screen—in light of the reality that we cannot actually yell at (or cheer for) the coaches and teams in person.

For those of us who are parents, it also provides an opportunity to teach their children to enjoy football as something that is more than a game and less than a god, and to feel God's pleasure together as we watch the Super Bowl. My wife and I are going to watch the game with our three children this evening. We are going to eat hot wings, nine-layer Mexican bean dip, chips and salsa, and several varieties of dessert.

Before the game starts, however, we are going to take a moment to teach them a Christian view of football. We will teach them that football is more than a game, less than a god, and a huge opportunity to feel God's pleasure together while eating good food and cheering in front of the television.

MORE THAN A GAME

Some Christians treat a sport such as football as a mere trivial-

ity, a distraction, or even an evil. But they are wrong to do so. One reason is that God created us to be like him (Gen 1:26-28). One of the ways we imitate him is by being creative and bringing out the hidden potentials of his creation.

Football is just that: it is a game that was created in the mind of Walter Camp, the “Father of American Football.” Football brings out the hidden potentials of its coaches and athletes, as they compete in a game that has its own unique goals, obstacles, rules, and parameters. It allows fans the opportunity to retreat from the stresses of life and work, employees the opportunity to earn a salary, and commentators the opportunity to blather.

Another reason is that God will return one day to rid the earth of sin and its consequences (Rev 21, 22), and sports such as football can provide a preview of that day. On game day, we can experience a type of excitement, enjoyment, and relaxation that temporarily frees us from the stresses and sadness of our life. That is why theologian Jurgen Moltmann often urged Christians to participate in play and sport as an anticipation of the day when there will be no more sadness or stress.

LESS THAN A GOD

So, on the one hand, we should not view football as a mere triviality. Yet, on the other hand, we should not elevate it to the status of a deity. The Bible teaches that humans often elevate some good aspect of God’s creation—such as sex, money, or power—to a status of ultimacy that God alone deserves. When that happens, the “good” thing becomes a false god or an “idol.”

Football is no exception. A number of social analysts (such as Charles Prebish, Allen Guttman, and David Prince) have argued that Americans tend to make a god out of sports such as football.

When football is treated as a “god,” and especially when it is worshiped in combination with other false gods (such as sex, money, and power), the outcome is ugly and harmful:

1. When football functions as a god, athletes become narcissistic. Comedian Dennis Miller puts it nicely when he rants: “Today’s athletes...can’t complete the most basic of tasks without performing some kind of field, ego-driven, self-congratulatory ritual... If I see one more athlete make a routine play and do a wild banshee itchy dance, I’m going to slap the man senseless with my remote....” (I agree, but I cannot publicly condone remote-slapping as a remedy for narcissism. For the record.)

2. When football functions as a god, athletes feel free to demean and degrade the competitors on rival teams. Over the past twenty years, the level of sportsmanship in our nation has dropped faster than the balance in Bernie Madoff’s trust funds. Athletes often treat their opponents with animosity and disdain rather than with competitive respect.

3. When football functions as a god, athletes are tempted to take illegal substances in order to enhance their natural abilities. The steroid epidemic has expanded more rapidly than Jose Canseco’s shoulders in the 1990s, cheating players and fans alike of a fair competition.

4. When football functions as a god, coaches are tempted to cheat by stealing information from other teams, paying players to injure their opponents, or by otherwise inflating, deflating, or altering the game illegally.

5. When football functions as a god, commentators and fans feel free to ridicule and degrade athletes and coaches publicly on social media. The sad aspect of this behavior is that those athletes and coaches deserve respect. The humorous aspect is the ironic

contrast between the ridiculers and the ridiculees. Miller rants, “What I’m talking about is the 400 lb. sports talk radio host who, in between mouthfuls of corned-beef sandwiches and mayonnaise salad washed down with a glass of pureed Snickers bars, says he thinks Derek Jeter’s starting to get a little soft.”

6. Finally, when football functions as a god, parents will unwittingly predispose their children toward false worship. Our children will notice if sports are the primary shapers of our identity. They’ll eventually pick up on the fact that football—rather than, say, church worship or marital commitment—brings out our deepest emotions.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENJOY GOD AND HIS WORLD TOGETHER

So the Super Bowl is more than a game and less than a god: It is a very good opportunity to enjoy God and his world together on a Sunday evening.

It is a time to celebrate humanity created in the image of God. Walter Camp exercised his God-given creativity when he invented football. Coaches and athletes use their God-given abilities to compete and to achieve a goal by overcoming obstacles while keeping the rules. Fans and commentators are able to suspend the stresses and sadness of life in order to watch a ballgame. It is a time to destress and forget the sad aspects of our lives in anticipation of the day when there will be no more sadness or stress.

Let’s enjoy the Super Bowl by keeping things in perspective. Foot-



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ball is an opportunity to remember God. God is the one who created us in his image, who created our world as a venue for the excitement and pleasure provided by sports and competition. God is the one who is far greater than any of his good gifts, and who therefore can fulfill us in a way that football or any other good gift cannot. And he is the one who will return one day to restore his creation, abolishing the stresses and sadness from which sports often provide relief.

To riff off of the apostle Paul, we might say, “Therefore, whatever we eat or drink, whatever sport we watch or play, whatever team we pull for or against, we do it all to the glory of God.”

A version of this chapter originally published at *BruceAshford.net*.

CHAPTER 4

VALENTINE'S DAY: PARENTS, TEACH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT DIFFERENT TYPES OF LOVE

In early February, the sights and sounds of Valentine's Day are everywhere, from the overstuffed Hallmark stands at the neighborhood Target to the Whitney Houston and Faith Hill music loops at the local mall. The stores are crowded as we rush to buy chocolates and gifts, as we plan dinners and desserts for our loved ones.

Yet, in the midst of the busyness, those of us who are parents want to find a way to teach our children about Valentine's Day. We want this holiday to spark a discussion about true love. How can we do that? One way to do that is to use C. S. Lewis' book, "The Four Loves," to teach our children about four types of true love, each of which is represented by an ancient Greek word.

AFFECTION

The first type of love is *storge*, which is translated affection in English. It is the broadest type of love; we experience affection toward a wide variety of people and things. It describes the sort of experience we have when we enjoy something or somebody familiar. We might experience affection when we play with a puppy, enjoy a conversation with a neighbor, or pull for our favorite university during a football game.

We teach our children that affection is important because it "makes the world go 'round." It makes the world a warm and enjoyable type of place. However, we also teach our children that our affections shouldn't be imbalanced or disordered. We should have more affection for our family than for our favorite football team,

more affection for our God than for our favorite dessert.

FRIENDSHIP

The second type of love is *phileo*, which translates as friendship. Friendship is more selective than affection, and therefore more concentrated and powerful. Often friendships form because two people share similar interests and goals, and develop their familiarity and concern for one another through pursuing and talking about those interests and goals. Friendship is related to the other human loves. Sometimes, romantic love leads to friendship; other times, friendship leads to romantic love.

We teach our children the irreplaceable importance of friendship as a type of love. We encourage them to love their friends truly rather than selfishly, by looking out for their friends' interests rather than merely their own. We also encourage them not to be "cliquish;" they can be selective about who their close friends are, but they should engage in those friendships in ways that don't make other children feel bad for not being a part of certain close friendships.

ROMANTIC LOVE

The third type of love is *eros*, which translates as romantic love. It is the least easy to analyze, but the most deeply felt. Although we live in an era in which people think of romance more in terms of "falling in love" than "being in love," there is, in fact, a big difference between the two. The most significant difference is that falling in love is a happenstance but being in love is a commitment. True romantic love is "being committed to one another in love." Depending on the time and season, romantic love may or may not involve sex. Yet, it always involves commitment.

As for romantic love, we can teach our children that falling in

love may be relatively easy (and often is based in fleeting emotions), but being in love can be difficult (because it is based in commitment). It is worthwhile and good and beautiful, but it is never easy. In fact, the goodness and beauty of it is found precisely in its difficulty. In romantic love, we learn the hard but rewarding discipline of loving another person truly and enduringly, even in spite of their peculiarities and character flaws. We can also teach them to pray that God would begin preparing them to love their future husband or wife.

DIVINE LOVE

The fourth type of love is *agape*, which translates as divine love. Although the Greeks did not necessarily ascribe divine connotations to it, Christians do, because it is the highest and most unselfish of loves. The Bible describes it in 1 John 3:16, “This is how we know what [agape] love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” Agape is not a natural human love; in fact, it goes against our nature. But agape is part of God’s nature. He loves the unlovable, finds beauty in ugliness, and ascribes value to the undeserving. Divine love gives of itself without asking for a gift in return.

We teach our children that God’s love is the highest love, and that it is God’s greatest gift. Affectionate love can adore our pets, friendship love can embrace our childhood besties, romantic love can treat our spouses to an unforgettable night out, yet divine love expands and transforms those loves. It is this divinely oriented and sacrificial love that gives us the fullest affections, the deepest friendships, and the most abiding marriages.

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CHAPTER 5

WHAT'S SO "GOOD" ABOUT GOOD FRIDAY?

On a dark Friday two thousand years ago, Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. Powerful members of the religious, political, and military communities colluded to strip him naked, mock him publicly, and crucify him. Yet two millennia later, Christians—who believe that Jesus is the Son of God—celebrate that dark day by calling it Good Friday.

Why on earth would Christians refer to this day as “Good” Friday?

It’s called Good Friday because even while powerful men were conspiring to kill the Son of God, God himself was acting to save the world from itself, once and for all. Even while the world’s authorities were conspiring to perpetrate history’s greatest evil, God was working to bring about history’s greatest good.

It didn’t have to be this way. After all, God created the world as his good kingdom in which humans could flourish, and in which they would never have to experience evil. Yet, the very first couple, Adam and Eve, decided to seize power for themselves and, in so doing, introduced evil into God’s good kingdom. From that day forward, humanity would live in a world riddled by evil and its consequences.

In the aftermath of Adam and Eve’s mutiny, God promised that he would one day send a Savior who would undo evil. That Savior was Jesus. The Bible says that “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:17).

But what does Jesus’ crucifixion have to do with him saving the

world? In response to that question, here are three things Jesus' crucifixion accomplished, which together provide a powerful explanation of why Christians call that dark day "Good Friday":

1. ON THE CROSS, JESUS SUFFERED SO THAT WE WOULD NOT HAVE TO SUFFER.

Unlike other religions Christianity teaches that all of us are born with a tendency to sin. Like Adam and Eve, we refuse to recognize God as God and we break his law repeatedly. Because God is the universal King and ultimate Law-giver, our sins are mutinous; they represent an attempt to steal his kingship and replace his laws. The Bible teaches that all of us deserve death as the penalty for our law-breaking.

Yet the Bible also teaches that God loves us and does not want us to suffer the penalty of our sin. For that reason, he took on a human body and came to earth as Jesus. When he did that, he "traded places" with us. He lived the sinless life that we should have lived and died the death that we deserve to die. He took our guilty record, died for it, and offers us his perfect record in return. That is why the apostle Paul declared that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

2. THROUGH THE CROSS, WE CAN BE RECONCILED TO GOD AND EACH OTHER.

Because of our sins, we alienate ourselves from God and others, but Jesus saves us from our sins in order to mend those relationships. That is why the Bible says, "For it pleased the Father that... by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross" (Col 1:19-20). In fact, Jesus' reconciling pow-

ers will cause all relational barriers to be torn down, including the barriers of ethnicity and nationality (Rev 5:9-10).

3. BECAUSE OF THE CROSS AND RESURRECTION, WE HAVE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE.

The Bible connects Jesus' crucifixion with his resurrection. After Jesus suffered on the cross, he was buried, but on the third day he rose from the grave! When he rose from the dead, he not only confirmed his divinity but declared that he would return one day to make things right. He will return to disestablish evil, sin, and death from their artificial throne and establish himself as the true King over a kingdom characterized by justice, peace, and love (Rev 21-22).

Until that day, he leaves us with a two-fold invitation. He invites us, first of all, to embrace him as the Savior that he is, to trust in him alone for our salvation. The Bible teaches that he alone can save (Acts 4:12) and that there is no sinner too bad for him to save (1 Tim 1:15). But he invites us, second of all, to allow his saving power to electrify our lives, turning us into the type of people whose speech and actions are patterned after his.

It does seem odd to refer to anybody's death as "good." Yet, God's good plan is often counterintuitive: As Jesus says, "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life will find it; 'the first are the last and the last are the first'" (Mark 10:31); and yes, through the "good" death of God's Son, humanity can receive true life (Rom 5:10).

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CHAPTER 6

JESUS AND EASTER: WHY THE RESURRECTION IS THE MOST IMPORTANT TRUTH IN THE WORLD

On Easter, Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That much is clear. What is not clear to many people, however, is what the resurrection means to Christians and why we would make such a big deal of it.

The resurrection only makes sense if we first understand what the Christian “gospel” is. In the ancient world, the word “gospel” was a media term referring to the announcement of an important or happy event. Christians adapted the word to refer to a world event they consider the most important and joyful.

What is the Christian gospel? It is the good news that, at a certain point in this world’s history, God became present to us in the man named Jesus, who we can know, love, and serve.

Through Jesus’ incarnation (“God taking on flesh”), life and ministry, death and resurrection, he defeated the worldly powers that oppress us, and made a way for we who are sinners to live in unbroken fellowship with God who is holy.

The Christian gospel is a factual statement. You can believe it or not believe it. But as Christians, we believe that it is not merely true; it is the most important truth in the world.

It is one that we cannot relegate to the private dimensions of life; it radiates outward into our public speech and actions.

It cannot be hidden within the four walls of our churches; we must make it known to the world.

In fact, immediately after he rose from the grave, Jesus appeared to his followers and gave them a command that Christians

call the “Great Commission.” In this commission, he reveals three powerful truths about the resurrection:

1. THE RESURRECTION REVEALS JESUS AS THE FINAL AUTHORITY IN THIS WORLD.

When Jesus appeared to his followers immediately after his resurrection, the first words out of his mouth were, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18). The resurrection was decisive proof of his divinity, of the fact that he was in fact present when heaven and earth were created, and that he retains sovereign authority over them.

This reality is important because all of us need to know who is finally in charge of this world.

A great many people think the final authority is the free market.

Others think the final authority is the United States, NATO, or the United Nations.

Still others think the authority is some sort of “deep state.”

But none of these entities are final authorities. Jesus is the sovereign authority and greatest power in public life; he is the authority against which even the largest governments and coalitions are ultimately powerless.

2. THE RESURRECTION COMPELS US TO TELL THE WORLD ABOUT JESUS.

The second thing Jesus told his disciples is that they should tell the whole world about his crucifixion and resurrection, and invite them to follow him, too (Matthew 28:19-20a).

If it is true that Jesus is the world’s final authority, and that through the cross and resurrection he has overcome the evil powers that seek to control us, then for us to refrain from telling the

world about him would not only be a crime toward humanity, but a collusion with the evil powers.

We must not collude. We must be witnesses of his resurrection. Our witness must be prophetic: a declaring to the world that Jesus is Lord and the world's reigning powers are not.

Our witness often will need to be sacrificial: Just as Jesus ministered as a homeless itinerant teacher, we must be willing to witness from a position of cultural weakness rather than power, and in the face of disapproval instead of applause.

Our witness should be humbly confident: We should be confident because we work in the service of the world's final authority, and we should be humble because we are only servants.

3. THE RESURRECTION REMINDS US THAT WORLD HISTORY WILL END ON A JOYFUL NOTE. (MATTHEW 28:20B).

The third and final thing Jesus told his followers is: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20b).

In effect he was saying, "I will walk alongside of you as you bear witness, and, always remember that at the end of the age, I will return to set the world aright. I will establish a worldwide kingdom in which justice will roll down like the waters, in which my authority will be recognized, and in which people from all nations, ethnic groups, and social classes will live together in peace, love, and unity."

J. R. R. Tolkien, author of "The Lord of the Rings," was captivated by the Bible's teaching about the resurrection, and wished to reflect it in his writing.

He knew that Westerners tend to be disillusioned with "fairy-tale endings" and prefer endings that are more "realistic," but he wanted them to understand that, because of the resurrection, a

deeply joyful ending is the most realistic. To borrow a phrase from Lord of the Rings, Tolkien wrote, “Everything sad becomes untrue.”

And immediately following this phrase, a pressing question arises from Sam Gamgee as he speaks to Gandalf: “What’s happened to the world?” To which Gandalf responds, “A great Shadow has departed.”

Christians celebrate the bodily resurrection of Jesus because we are happy that, in the future, the “great Shadow” of death and sin will finally depart (Romans 8:18-25).

Something momentous and good has “happened to the world,” which is why we invite the world to celebrate with us by embracing Jesus as the resurrected Savior.

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CHAPTER 7

MOTHER'S DAY: GOD LOVES YOU LIKE A MOTHER (NOT JUST AS A FATHER)

A mother's love for her children is one of the strongest and most mysterious forces in the world. It carries her through the pain of childbirth. It washes over her face as she smiles at her baby for the first time. It endures through exhausting days and sleepless nights, over the course of months and years. It is nurturing, faithful, protective, and sacrificial.

And that is why it is also one of the clearest pictures of God's love for us, his children.

A mother's love is nurturing. It causes a baby to grow and develop in a way it could not on its own, and is exhibited in nearly everything a mother does to help her little child—feeding him, rocking him, changing him, talking to him, smiling at him.

Consider the example of a mother's smile. "After a mother has smiled at her child for many days and weeks, she finally receives the child's smile in response," writes Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. "She has awakened love in the heart of her child."

When a mother smiles at her infant, she gives a glimpse of an even bigger truth: that God has loved us from the very beginning, especially through his Son Jesus, and that God's love awakens in us the potential for love. That is why the apostle John wrote, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

A mother's love is faithful. It stays up late nights with a screaming baby, days and weeks and months on end. It endures exhausting days of changing diapers and cleaning messes. It patiently persists in innumerable and unmentionable ways, even when no



When a mother smiles at her infant, she gives a glimpse of an even bigger truth: that God has loved us from the very beginning, especially through his Son Jesus, and that God's love awakens in us the potential for love.

A mother's love is protective. With her infant, a mother is always on alert, waking up at the slightest sound, caring during times of sickness, guarding against potential harm. As the infant grows into childhood and, later, adolescence, she remains alert and continues to be protective.

When a mother protects her children, she provides a glimpse of God's promise to protect his children. Consider especially the way a mother protects a small child who might hurt herself: touching a burner, falling down the stairs, or stepping out into the road. In that same way, God offers to save us, to protect us from our own sin and its consequences.

That is why Scripture declares, "The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my strength, in whom I will trust; My shield and...my salvation, my stronghold" (Psalm 18:2).

A mother's love is sacrificial. More than anything, a mother's love is sacrificial. A mother stretches herself literally and metaphorically, from the time of conception until the twilight of her own life. A mother never stops being a mother.

thanks are given in return.

When a mother faithfully attends to the needs of her baby, she reminds us of an even bigger truth: that God will always do what he has said and fulfill what he has promised (Psalm 141:6). We can take him at his word and rely upon him. His love endures through sleepless nights and exhausting days, in myriad and unmentionable ways.

In this way, a mother's love teaches us the deepest and most profound truth about God: that God loved us enough to come to earth, take a human body, and sacrifice himself on the cross for us.

Why would he do that?

Unlike other religions, Christianity teaches that each of us is born with a tendency to sin. The very first couple—Adam and Eve—refused to recognize God as God, and, like them, we do the same. We refuse to recognize God as God and we break his law repeatedly. Because God is the universal King and ultimate Law-giver, our sins are mutinous; they represent an attempt to dethrone him and rewrite his laws. The Bible teaches that the just penalty for our law-breaking is death.

Yet the Bible also teaches that God's love for us, his children, is sympathetic and sacrificial. He does not want us to suffer the penalty of our sin. For that reason, he took on a human body and came to earth as Jesus. When he did that, he "traded places" with us. He lived the sinless life that we should have lived, and died the death that we deserve to die. He took our guilty record, died for it, and offers us his perfect record in return. That is why the apostle Paul declared that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

No mother is perfect. Every earthly mother will let us down. But we love our mothers for the good we have seen in them and received from their hands. We love them for the ways they have nurtured us, been faithful to us, protected us, and sacrificed for us. And we thank them that they—even if they are unaware—have provided us with a real, even if imperfect, picture of God's love for us.

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CHAPTER 8

FATHER'S DAY: TO ANYBODY WHO THINKS AN IMPERFECT MAN CAN'T BE A GREAT FATHER

One of the saddest trends in American life is the demotion of fatherhood to secondary status. While a mother's love is rightly acknowledged as one of the strongest and most mysterious forces in the world, a father's love is often treated as weaker and less significant. While mothers are rightly praised for their virtues, fathers tend to be the butt of jokes.

Think about it. If you were to form your opinion of fatherhood through the examples presented on television, you would think fathers are pathetic characters who play a relatively insignificant role and deserve to be the butts of endless jokes. About the best treatment fathers get is to play the role of a likeable dimwit (think Homer Simpson, or Phil Dunphy from "Modern Family"); other times they're sex-obsessed derelicts (Charlie in "Two and a Half Men"); perhaps most often they're simply mulish idiots (think Larry David in "Curb Your Enthusiasm," Peter Griffin from "Family Guy," or Frank from "Shameless"). There are some exceptions, but it is a good generalization: As a culture, we seem to want to roll our eyes at dad.

Even in the church, the difference between Mother's Day sermons and Father's Day sermons can be amusing. On Mother's Day, we appreciate the mothers and tell them how amazing they are, and rightly so. But on Father's Day, we often poke fun at dads and tell them how much room they've got for improvement.

I'm glad that, from a young age, my mother taught me to view things differently than that. Of course, my father had flaws and

imperfections. Of course, there were things about him I didn't appreciate. But he was my father, and he was a pretty good one.

Now that I am a father myself, I understand that any dad worth his salt is already acutely aware of his own flaws and failures, even if he doesn't always let on. But I also understand that God chose me, and imperfect men like me, to play indispensable roles in the lives of our families.

A man can be the least influential man in the world in his career or social life, but the day he becomes a father, he becomes the most important man in the world for that child. Little boys and girls don't know or care how important their daddy is in his career or social life. As far as they are concerned, he is at the center of the universe.

That is why sociological studies show that a father's presence leads to better academic performance, makes them more likely to graduate from college, and more likely to experience fulfilling



Little boys and girls don't know or care how important their daddy is in his career or social life. As far as they are concerned, he is at the center of the universe.

romantic relationships. When a father is present, a child is less likely to exhibit anti-social behavior, experience depression, succumb to peer pressure in relation to drug use, become incarcerated, or live in poverty. In other words, fathers really matter.

Given the fact of a father's influence, how can fathers be good stewards of that influence? There are three especially significant ways that a man—no matter how imperfect he is, regardless of how many failures he has tucked into his belt—can be a great father.

A father can protect his children. He can protect them from bodily harm through his physical presence. He can help protect them from psychological harm by affirming them during their moments of fear, anxiety, and insecurity. He can protect them from relational harm by guiding and overseeing their relationships and dating habits. He can, and he should.

A father can provide for his children. Even though most of us are not wealthy and cannot provide extravagantly for our children, we can provide food for the table and clothes for the closet. But we can also provide other things that are often neglected. We can teach our children how to work, instill in them a sense of responsibility, help them with their schoolwork, and play with them during their downtime. The greatest wealth we give to our children is intangible.

A father can point his children to God, who is the prototype for fatherhood (Ephesians 3:14-15). Unlike earthly fathers, God the Father has no flaws or imperfections. So the best thing a father can do is to point his children back to him continually as the Good Father who will never fail them or let them down. (In fact, my four-year-old son's favorite song is entitled, "Good Good Father".)

So, on Father's day, let's thank our own fathers for the good we've seen in their lives. And for those of us who are fathers, let's thank God for the opportunity to play a significant and irreplaceable role in the lives of our children. Let's do our best to create a shelter of protection and provision within which our wives and children can live freely and happily under our care. Most importantly of all, let's point our children to God, the only Father who has no imperfections and who will never let them down.

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CHAPTER 9

THREE ESSENTIAL THINGS PARENTS SHOULD SHARE WITH THEIR KIDS ABOUT CHRISTMAS

In December, it begins to look a lot like Christmas, everywhere we go, from the Judy Garland music loops at the local mall to the inflatable reindeer on the neighbor's lawn. People are rushing to buy gifts and decorate their homes for the holidays; they are anticipating family get-togethers and how to negotiate them with as much cheer and as little fighting as possible.

In the midst of the busyness, many of us try to discern how to teach our children about why Christmas matters.

Of course, we teach our children the Christmas story of a God who loves us so much that he became a child, a little babe in a manger. About three decades later, he'd live as a homeless traveling preacher, who humbled himself even further by suffering on the cross. He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, where he now offers us salvation and promises to return and make the world right one day.

So far, so good. But as we tell this beautiful and powerful narrative, what are some practical takeaways for our children? Here are three ways we can apply the Christmas story to the lives of our young children:

1. GOD IS CLOSE TO OUR HEARTS, NOT FAR AWAY IN THE SKY.

The Christmas story teaches us that God chose not to love us from afar. He chose to love us up close. He chose to meet us where we are by being born as the baby Jesus, so that he could reveal himself to us in front of our very eyes.

Why does this matter to our children? Even though God no longer walks the earth as a man, he remains close to us in a way that only he can. This is an amazing truth. The same God who put the stars in the sky placed the freckles on your son's face. The same God who keeps the earth rotating on its axis gives your daughter breath and life during the day. The same God who created our children's minds and bodies now listens attentively to them when they pray before bedtime.

2. GOD'S LOVE IS AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING, NEVER-GIVING-UP, ALWAYS AND FOREVER LOVE.

More than anything, the Christmas story teaches us the penetrating and persistent power of God's love. When he chose to be born as a human child, he was not only choosing to be close to us. He was also choosing a way of life in which he would one day suffer and be killed on a cross. On the cross, Jesus would pay the penalty for our sins. In other words, his love goes all the way; as Sally Lloyd Jones puts it in *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, it is a never-stopping, never-giving-up, always and forever love.

This sacrificial and universal love speaks volumes to our children. They don't have to be "good" kids or "winners" for God to love them. They don't have to live on the right side of the tracks or be on "the right side of history." Jesus' love overcomes those labels by teaching our children that God loves them and values them no matter who they are, regardless of their moral track record, social rank, or financial status.

3. GOD'S LOVE MOTIVATES US TO BE GENEROUS AND SACRIFICIAL.

The Christmas story portrays Jesus' birth as an incomparable gift to us. God's gift to us is that he was willing to be born in a

barn, swaddled in cloth, and cradled in a horse's trough. All for the purpose of demonstrating his love for us. There was no depth too low for him to stoop, no distance too far for him to travel, no sacrifice too great for him to make.

How does this incomparable gift affect the way we teach our children about Christmas? It gives us the opportunity to instill in our children that true love is not a feeling but a commitment. It is a commitment to value other people more than we value ourselves, to give rather than take, to sacrifice rather than hoard. As we and our children tap into the love of Jesus Christ, that love flows through us toward others. That's why we give gifts on Christmas.



The Christmas story teaches us that God chose not to love us from afar. He chose to love us up close.

Any parent knows that children love stories and are shaped by them more than they are shaped by rules. And as much as children need good instructions to follow, what they need even more is a story that makes sense of the rules and gives meaning to their little lives.

Well, the Christmas story is the greatest one of all. Or to be more precise, it is a powerfully significant event in the greatest story of all, the narrative of God becoming human in order to bring us into relationship with him. As we draw closer to Christmas, we have an irreplaceable opportunity to show our children that their lives—their stories—are a part of that grand Christian story.

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