

GENERATIONS

“I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you. For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me” (1 Corinthians 4:14-16 KJV).

Every generation has suffered from a serious shortage of fathers. It was a problem in the days of the Apostle Paul in Palestine and the Roman Empire, and it continues to be a dilemma today in a very different culture. This isn't just a crisis in our secular society; it's also a problem within Christianity. Paul's words are indeed true: “you do not have many fathers.”

Being a father is one of the most challenging and the most rewarding roles a man can fulfill. Loving, responsive children bring the highest measure of fulfillment to life. If men could see the incredible pride in a child's eyes in being a valued son or daughter, all men would want to be a dad!

As the father of three wonderful children and the grandfather of ten amazing grandchildren, I have personally experienced the joy of children and the super-sized joy of grandchildren. Listen to these

words of King Solomon: “Children’s children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children” (Proverbs 17:6).

FATHERS: ANCIENT AND MODERN

Today, many parents have a very distorted view of their kids. Some see their sons and daughters as ways to live out their own dreams, so they put enormous pressure on their children to succeed in sports, academics, dance, or some other pursuit. Others see their children as nuisances. These parents are absorbed in their own goals, and they resent every moment their kids pull them away from their self-indulgent pursuits. And of course, an alarming number of children never see their first bright day of life. The tragedy of abortion cuts their lives short. In whatever way a child is devalued, overlooked, or neglected, everyone loses. The child, of course, misses the warmth and instruction of attentive, loving parents. And the parents and grandparents miss the joy of seeing a little life blossom into maturity.

God has put it in the heart of parents to instinctively treasure their children. This is why Abraham wouldn’t give up hope for a child, even when he was 99 years old. God had promised him a son, and through that child, Abraham would become the father of many nations (Genesis 12:1-3 and Romans 4:17-18). When the promised son was born, Abraham named him “Isaac,” which means “joy and laughter.” When the baby came, joy came! Did you know that this is the first time the word “love” is used in the Bible? It is in reference to Abraham’s love for his son Isaac (Genesis 22:2). If Isaac hadn’t been born, several nations (especially Israel) wouldn’t exist today—and an old man wouldn’t have had the supreme joy of seeing God fulfill His

promise as he watched his little boy grow up.

Being a father is a huge blessing. In fact, they are multiplied because they're shared blessings: shared fulfillment, shared dreams, a shared history, and a shared legacy. Children turn smiles into laughter! Just one hug from a grandchild brings com-

fort in middle of life's deepest sorrows. And when life comes to an end—and it will—we won't be alone at death. Those we love will be around us. When God promised Jacob that he would become a great nation, He also promised that he would not be alone when he died. God showed him that his son, Joseph, would be at his side and that Joseph would close his father's eyes in death: "and Joseph will put his hands upon your eyes" (Genesis 46:1-4). As the hour of death neared, all of Jacob's sons and grandchildren gathered around him. Jacob blessed them, and their presence blessed Jacob.

I've had a "Jacob and Joseph" experience, and I'll treasure it until my last breath. Our family was together when my father, Harry Robert Hilton, passed away. We gathered in his hospital room in the Intensive Care Unit. My mother, Anna, was holding Daddy's hand as he gazed into the loving eyes of his children and our spouses, along with several grandchildren. Unable to speak, Dad looked around the room at each of us. Catching our eyes, he smiled at us individually. We were very sad, but our sadness was filled with genuine hope and love. We sang an old gospel song:

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“Master, Redeemer, Savior of the world.
Wonderful, Counselor, bright morning star.
Lily of the valley, provider, and friend.
He was yesterday. He will be tomorrow.
The beginning and end.”

As we sang, Daddy turned his gaze toward Momma, the love of his life. Then, as a single tear fell from his eye and rolled down his cheek, he smiled at her and closed his eyes in death.

I miss him to this very day. No one can take the place of my father. I’ve had many instructors, mentors, and teachers—but only one father. It has been 10 years since he died, yet every day my Dad becomes more and more “the pride of *his* children” (Proverbs 17:6 NLT). Every day I think of my Dad and recall some wonderful memory. Others may have taught me more, but Dad did more to fill my heart and shape my character. He left me his passion for preaching, his love for Christ Jesus, and his compassion for the hurting and helpless. He gave me what none other could...his freckles, his big smile, his funny laugh, his slumped shoulders, and his crooked nose.

Today, our culture is broken. The roles of father, mother, husband, and wife are confused. Marriage is compromised, fidelity is a lost art, and family is becoming an archaic term. Some may have no reference point or understanding of the role of fathers because their own fathers were absent or abusive. Yet there’s still a father-shaped vacuum in their hearts because God the Father put it there (Genesis 2:24).

Sometimes, the story of a family takes some odd twists and turns. I know. I’ve experienced a shock or two.

A SURPRISE BROTHER

My father volunteered for military service when he was only 16 years old. Like many in his generation, he had a deep love for America, even though he had faced severe hardships growing up in the Great Depression. After World War II, Dad served in the Occupation of Japan and in Korea. While in Japan, he met a lovely girl from the Philippines named Josephine. Dad fell in love. He affectionately called her "Josie." Josie spoke Japanese and served the U.S. military as a translator. They married in Japan and soon had a little boy they named Terry Lee. When the Korean War flared up, Dad was sent into combat on the peninsula. The fighting was intense, but the news about casualties was sometimes wrong. Military authorities reported to Josie that Dad had been killed in action. After grieving his death, Josie remarried and left Japan.

In fact, Dad had been severely wounded, but he survived by the grace of God. After Dad's recovery, he couldn't find Josie. He returned to America. He met my mother in Tennessee and together raised our family. Although Dad couldn't find out what happened to Josie and Terry, he continually prayed that God would reunite him with his son. Every holiday, Dad solemnly prayed with our family for Terry.

Finally, just six years ago, Terry and I found each other! Terry was 57 and I was 52. I was amazed...Terry looks so much like our father! When we met face-to-face, I instantly realized Terry has Dad's smile, his expressions, his walk, and his compassion for the less fortunate and children. The similarities are amazing. Terry is such a treasure. Thank God, I have my big brother!

But Terry missed meeting Dad. Dad had passed away less than two years before we found each other. Terry and his wife, Janet, flew from California to Tennessee and stayed in our home for two weeks. He was filled with questions about Dad. I did my best to describe his laugh, likes and dislikes, favorite foods, personality, passions, and purpose. Terry wanted to learn all he could about our father. To discover more about Dad, he spent time with my mother, Anna. Terry also visited Dad's brother, Wayne, and his newfound younger siblings,

David, Patti, Carol, and me.

Terry wanted to see Dad's hometown, his childhood home—and his grave. At the grave, Terry spent several hours alone. Every evening we looked at our family albums of photographs, his and mine. We laughed, we talked, we embraced—and we cried.

Terry Lee was grateful to meet all of us and spend time with his brothers, sisters, and our

Mom, but he still missed Dad. Although Terry never met Dad, he loved him! In the same way, we loved Terry, even before we ever met him. His longing for a relationship with Dad still breaks my heart. Terry is a wonderful man, a community leader, and has accomplished so much. Yet there was always a longing—a cry for his father.

Terry's not alone. All of us cry out for our fathers. In our pursuit, we uncover more love and heartache than we ever imagined, and in the quest, we may find three things we thought we'd never

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find: ourselves, our purpose, and God. In this book, we'll look at the importance of fathers in the life of an individual, a family, a community of faith, and a society. We'll draw strongly on the principles the Apostle Paul outlines in his relationship with Timothy, his "spiritual son" in the faith. But these principles are applied in three distinct ways: as a father raises his own children, as spiritual parents mentor spiritual sons and daughters, and as all parents instill faith, hope, love, and purpose in their children. In other words, virtually all of us have a role in the lives of young people, so all of us can learn from Paul's example.

Before we get to Paul's principles, I want to describe the conditions of our present culture and tell the story about the parents who have shaped my life.