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Overcoming Family Issues



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Index of abbreviations

All scripture references are from the King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

AMP Amplified Bible • NIV New International Version • NAS New American Standard

NKJ New King James Version • NCV New Century Version • TM The Message • TLB The Living Bible

NRS New Revised Standard Version • PHPS Phillips N.T. in Modern English

• GWT God's Word Translation • TEV Today's English Version • NEB New English Bible

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Welcome

to *Overcoming* Family Issues

'Through our relationship with God we glimpse family as it was intended'

Is your family more like the Waltons or the Simpsons? The Bradys or the Addams? Probably a little of all of them – if you're like most of us at any rate! Because every family is a 'work in progress', weird and wonderful, funny and fallible, living together through seasons of smiles and of struggle. But you can rest assured that whether blended, extended or fragmented, your family matters matter to God.

From the minor irritations that bubble on the surface of family life, to more serious undercurrents that we worry might drag us out to sea, we take heart knowing that the family was God's idea and intention (Genesis 2:18 NIV). He is no stranger to its complications and in the Bible He reassures us that families have faced problems right from the beginning – just look at Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:8), David (2 Samuel 11) and even Jesus (Matthew 1:18–25). Whatever we are going through, our God is one who understands and looks at each of our families with 'kindness and love' (Titus 3:4).

As Christians we also have the privilege of a place in the eternal family of God (Ephesians 2:19 NLT). We are 'adopted' by the Father of creation (Romans 8:15 NLT) and invited to experience family life with Him. Through our relationship in Jesus we glimpse family as it was intended and we journey with Him who 'will hold (us) close' even if our earthly family leaves us (Psalm 27:10 NLT). With Him we can join our families on journeys of transformation from tragedy, receive wisdom for the road (Proverbs 3:5–6 NIV) and the blessings of love and laughter along the way.

What an encouragement to know that we don't need to face our family issues alone, but together – together with those we love and together with God. So whether you are a son, daughter, parent, step-parent or grandparent, your family needs you. Let us press forward together to see our families grown and strengthened by a God who can do 'immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine' (Ephesians 3:20 NIV).

The *Overcoming* Series is designed to help people like you find God's help in dealing with the challenges that face us all.

Contained in these little booklets are big truths from God's Word, guidance on how to pray, and practical suggestions for change. Turn over to begin reading a selection of articles and testimonies written by people who understand what you're going through and long to help you overcome. Then, starting on page 16, there are 28 readings from Bob Gass, author of *The Word For Today*, to help you practice new thought patterns and habits day by day for a month. As the Bible says, 'He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world' (1 John 4:4). With the help of our great God, you can overcome any challenge you face.



Discover the other titles in the *Overcoming* Series on page 35

Family Issues -

Where do I start?

‘Our aim is not a “happy family”, but a healthy one’

‘with God guiding us in careful construction, our ‘house’ – our family – can be a secure shelter’

What does it mean to be a ‘family’ these days? Over recent decades there has been a significant shift in many people’s understanding of the traditional family unit. Some think it’s a completely out-dated concept, and that families are simply groups of individuals living under the same roof. Others stand for the centrality of the ‘nuclear’ family of husband, wife and 2.4 children. Still others believe a family isn’t really a family unless many generations of live close by, sometimes under the same roof.

But despite changing dynamics and increased diversity, families seem to be as important to society as ever – a view shared by professional bodies, health agencies and the UK prime minister himself when he declared that, ‘Family comes first.’ The last UK census recorded that there were 17.9 million families in 2011 and in a recent survey, the majority of us said would still turn to family before our friends in times of need.

The importance of the family was set in our hearts by its Creator, and as Christians we look to the Bible for instruction about family life. We know that God intended for a man and a woman to leave their parents, be united in marriage, and that the blessing of children was designed to be part of that exclusive relationship (Genesis 2:24 NLT).

Yet all around us today we see that family life has evolved from God’s original design. Situations such as the tragic death of a family member, the acts of an unfaithful partner, or a long search for love can also mean that we find ourselves with a family issue beyond our choice or control. Thankfully,

we remember that families were not created for comparison: no family will be perfect (Romans 3:23 NIV) and no two will ever be alike.

Families can be hard work, but they are worth it. In *The Parenting Book*, Nicky and Sila Lee encourage us to remember, ‘Creating close, family relationships is a long term endeavour. There is no quick gimmick which sorts it all out, rather a steady investment at many levels. Building a home that is a healthy and nurturing environment...requires vision, planning and hard work.’

Our aim is not a ‘happy family’, but a healthy one. It’s about investing in our family relationships, building a ‘house’ that will last and creating a safe space for a healthy exchange of emotions as we journey together. This is sure to involve forgiveness, healing and hard work, but with God guiding us in careful construction, our ‘house’ – our family – can be a secure shelter where ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control’ can flourish (Galatians 5:22–23 NLT) and brokenness can be restored.

(Sources: National Statistics Families and Households in the UK, April 2011; David Cameron speaking at the Conservative Party conference, October 2012; Economic and Social Research Council; The Parenting Book by Nicky and Sila Lee)

Step by step

Your guide to overcoming family issues with God's help

'The Bible gives us clear directions on a number of family issues and acts as a plumbline for others'

The issues facing families today are many and varied. There are a number of very helpful resources available to provide support on a range of family challenges (see page 15), but what are the common considerations for our journey as we seek God's restoration and transformation?

Here are four 'C's to help us when addressing family issues:

1. Construction

How is my family built?

Individuals are created, but a healthy family must be constructed. Piece by piece, we lay the crucial foundations and build year on year. Sometimes we strive to see a new expression of family emerge from the ashes of our past experiences and sometimes we face surface issues which are really the result of deeper structural ones.

Every family has its own 'DNA' and we each play a key role in creating and shaping that unique identity and what it truly values. Before we face particular

issues, it can be helpful to consider how our family has been constructed up till now, and imagine what we would like it to look like in the future.

Remember that a wise man builds on the rock (Matthew 7:24–27) and that Jesus should be our cornerstone (Acts 4:11). The Bible gives us clear directions on a number of family issues and acts as a plumbline for many more, so let us remain firmly in God and His word as we keep building our families.

TRY...



What is your family building on, and what do you want your family to look like? Check your foundations. Are you choosing to build positively for the future, or merely reactively against negative past experiences?

2. Compassion

How does my family act?

Everybody knows that actions speak louder than words, yet the truth is that often we save our best – our most kind and considerate actions – for those outside of the family! Our actions towards everybody, including our family, should be rooted in Jesus commandment '...love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:39 NIV).

Compassion must always be our motivator: it means being full of love, yet includes a depth of understanding

and sympathy for others that results in a real response to their struggles. Without love and compassion for each other, a healthy family simply won't hold.

God has shown incredible forgiveness and compassion to each of us in His family, despite our sin (Romans 5:8). May this give us a starting point for being moved towards compassion for others and for re-kindling the kindness in our day to day living.

We are unlikely to approach family issues well if we are full of anger, resentment or unforgiveness and sometimes our pain can lead to actions which make already delicate situations worse. Invite God to come in to your situation and particularly into your heart – to heal hurts and cultivate a compassionate spirit.



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3. Connection

How does my family relate?

In his book **Loving Our Kids on Purpose**, **Danny Silk** reminds us that **'Jesus promoted relationship above the rules.'** The strength of our internal family connections and relationships will play a big part when working any issue through from beginning to end. It's much deeper than simply sharing the same house, history or surname – it's about our heart connections. When our motives change from wanting to achieve a short-term goal, to working at a long-term connection, it gives us a fresh perspective. Our focus changes from results to relationships.

In his book **7 Habits of Highly Effective Families**, **Stephen Covey** says **'...to seek first to understand and then to be understood opens the floodgates to heart-to-heart family living.'** Making a particular effort to understand problems from another's viewpoint is never a waste of time and can in fact transform a situation. Equally, when other family members attempt to connect with us and understand our struggles, it is important that we let them in.

TRY...



Authors Nicky and Sila Lee suggest that the crucial role of the family is one that **'...provides support; fun; a moral compass and a model for relating to others.'** In order for any of these things to be achieved we need to be in real relationships. What do you truly desire – friendship with your family, or obedience and control?

4. Communication

How does my family talk to each other?

The way we choose our words and the way we say them, along with the 80% of our communication that is non-verbal, must not be underestimated when addressing family issues.

Self-awareness and clear communication are vital in good families as **'Careless words stab like a sword, but wise words bring healing'** (Proverbs 12:18 NCV). Creating a physical time and space where communication about difficult issues can take place, in an age-appropriate way, is a very practical way to move your family forward.

We must be especially careful not to measure ourselves against others. Don't be tempted to spend precious talking time **'comparing what we do know about our family with what we don't know about others,'** as Willow Creek's Pastor Darren Whitehead puts it. No two families will grow or function in the same way and therefore judgements on other families and comparisons with them not be helpful.

TRY...



Without effective communication it will be very hard to purposefully build a healthy family. When we're cruising comfortably it is just as important to spend time working at our family life as when we hit a bump in the road. Speak carefully and listen closely.

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A second chance at family

Billy and Bev's story shows that no matter how bad things get, God can heal and restore broken relationships

IT'S NOT UNUSUAL for people to be married twice nowadays. But Billy and Bev Gilvear have been married twice... to each other! And it's all because of the amazing power of God.

Billy was born the son of missionary parents and raised in a strict Christian home, but always felt distant from his father and so rejected his faith at an early age. 'I knew that my dad was sold out for the church and for his ministry but I didn't get much time with him', Billy writes in his powerful memoir, *Storming Home*. 'Despite all the unhappy times we shared together I longed for his attention and his affirmation of me as his son.'

Aged just 16, he left home to join the army and make his own way in the world. A determined and driven young man, he quickly rose through the ranks, eventually training as an officer at Sandhurst. During this time, he met a military girl, Bev, and soon they were married. But their relationship was built on shaky foundations – not least because by this time, Billy was drinking heavily.

After a medical discharge from the army, Billy found lucrative work in the private security business, protecting famous actors, models and pop stars. The heady world of celebrity gave him even easier access to drink and, for the first time, drugs.

Powerless to stop what had become a downward spiral, Bev left Billy, taking their young sons, Jordan and Jack, with her. Later, when Billy started getting involved with criminal gangs to pay for his drugs, she finally asked for a divorce.

AT BILLY'S LOWEST POINT, CHRIST MET HIM AND BEGAN A HEALING PROCESS

'The wheels were starting to come off in my mind,' writes Billy. 'I thought, "I lost everything – my wife, my sons, my dignity, and now the gang guys have turned on me so that I have literally nowhere to go" ... I decided that I couldn't go on any more.'

He vowed to commit suicide, and researched the best way to kill himself, choosing a location and even tying a noose for himself. It was at this lowest point that Christ met him and began a healing process that would see Billy and Bev's family put back together in dramatic fashion.

'[Bev] was thrilled to know that I had got right with God because by that stage she too had become a Christian ... But we were divorced and whenever I went over there to visit the children it was obvious that she did not want to spend time with me. I couldn't blame her after all I had put her through, but it hurt like a knife stuck deep in my heart', writes Billy.

It was at Billy's baptism as he gave his moving testimony of God's amazing healing that Bev felt God speaking directly to her:

'She saw something in me that night she had never seen before. Apparently when I said "I was blind but now I can see" the Lord spoke to her and asked "Bev, can't you see? You have been praying for a man in your life. Can't you see that this is the man?"

She wondered what God meant by that but at that moment the Holy Spirit spoke to her heart again so clearly that she was left in no uncertainty. He told her, "You can love this man again."

Billy and Bev got back together and began a new chapter in their lives together. They were remarried, but this time with Christ at the centre. They went on to have two more children, Ben and Lydia.

Today Billy is an evangelist, regularly sharing his powerful testimony as he shares the good news of Jesus.

***Storming Home: Billy's Story* by Billy Gilvear (with a foreword by J. John) is published by Monarch Books and available from UCB2Go.**



‘A’ is for AFFIRMATION

Rob Parsons urges you to discover the power of encouragement

If you want to bring out the very best in your children and your partner, then discover the power of encouragement. It should never be insincere, but it can be given for small things.

Affirmation can become an attitude. I sometimes see families that are being slowly destroyed by negative or sarcastic speech. I watch as husbands humiliate their wives in public with jokes over cooking or weight and hear partners trash in front of friends what the men in their lives have achieved. I gasp sometimes as parents tear holes in the tender self-esteems of young children, like the father who said to me as his thirteen-year-old daughter came into the room, ‘Look what the cat dragged in.’

Sometimes the power of our parents’ words is not diminished even when we are adults. One woman, who as a child rarely heard her mother praise her, recalled how on her wedding day her mother had remarked, ‘You look smart!’ She said, ‘I didn’t want to look smart. I wanted to look beautiful.’

A HISTORY OF AFFIRMATION

But we cannot always give praise in our families. Sometimes we have to face somebody and say that what they’ve done is unacceptable and can’t go on. Sometimes husbands and wives have to say hard things to each other, and certainly parents must be prepared to take knocks in the popularity stakes.

But even when we have to say difficult things, it’s easier and much more effective when it comes from lips that readily praise – where there is a history of affirmation. In fact, some research has suggested that to flourish as human beings – to experience a sense of well-being – we need more positive comments than negative ones in our lives – to a factor of three to one.

We can use encouragement even in extreme situations. Recently a mother came up to me at the end of one of the talks I give for the parents of teenagers and told me something of her story. Her son was sixteen and addicted to illegal drugs

– in fact he’d spent time in a young offenders’ institution. He’d been released the day before she came to the seminar.

She said, ‘Last evening I said to my son, “Jack, please come in tonight before eleven o’clock; I worry when you’re out late.”’

‘WE NEED MORE POSITIVE COMMENTS THAN NEGATIVE ONES IN OUR LIVES – TO A FACTOR OF THREE TO ONE’

And then she said, ‘Rob, last night he came in on time, and it wasn’t until I heard you tonight talking about encouraging our children that I realised I hadn’t thanked him for that. When I go home tonight I’m going to tell him how much I appreciated his caring for me in that way.’

This is an extract from *The Sixty Minute Family* by Rob Parsons, which is part of the bestselling *Sixty Minute* series on parenting and marriage. For further information visit the Care for the Family website at www.careforthefamily.org.uk/resources.

THE FASTER WAY TO IMPROVED BEHAVIOUR

This is a principle that is called ‘Catching your children doing something right’. As mothers, fathers, step-parents – even as employers – we’re used to catching people doing something wrong and criticising them for it.

But the faster and more effective way to improved behaviour is to catch them doing something right and encourage them in it. Many of us, even as adults, are crushed by the constant pointing out of where we go wrong. This is a great tragedy – when the ear never hears praise, the heart loses the will to try.

When you get the hang of catching people doing something right, you can often find the opportunity to encourage – even when it’s not that easy.



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More help with Family Issues

Advice and Guidance

Family issues can often be complex and emotionally very difficult to address. Although we can often work difficulties through within our own family or with trusted friends or pastors, sometimes it can be really helpful to ask others with specialist knowledge and experience to support us in maintaining a healthy family life.

Useful Contacts

The following organisations can offer advice, guidance and practical support in family matters:

Relate

Relate offers advice and counselling along with a range of therapies, services and workshops to support healthy relationships.

www.relate.org.uk

0300 100 1234

Care for the Family

Care for the Family is a national charity which aims to promote strong family life and to help those who face family difficulties.

www.careforthefamily.org.uk

(029) 2081 0800

Citizen's Advice Bureau

The Citizens Advice service offers people help in resolving a number of issues by providing a free, independent and confidential advice.

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Further Reading

The Parenting Book by Nicky and Sila Lee (Alpha International)

Family Time: Parenting Children by Mark and Lindsay Melliush (David C Cook)

7 Habits of Highly Effective Families by Stephen R. Covey (Simon and Schuster)

Loving Our Kids on Purpose by Danny Silk (Destiny Image)

Your 28 Days of Change

God's spirit is in you and...

'He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world'

It takes time to change long-standing thought patterns, habits and behaviour. We need to keep coming before God in our brokenness and asking for His help.

The rest of this Overcoming booklet is designed to help bring you before God for the next 28 days – to learn from His wisdom in His Word and to access His healing power through prayer.

Make a decision to set aside the time each day to read and respond in prayer. Don't worry if you miss a day or two, just pick up wherever you left off.

Keep a notebook and pen nearby to jot down anything that occurs to you while you read, or quotes that inspire you to think differently. Trust that God will speak to you personally about your healing over the coming weeks.

Remember, Jesus is on your side, willing you to succeed. Right now, He is praying to the Father on your behalf.

God's Spirit is in you, and 'He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world' (1 John 4:4).



The daily readings are written by Bob and Debby Gass, authors of *The UCB Word For Today*, and originally appeared there first. Over a million people around the world read Bob and Debby's warm, encouraging words each day.

You can receive a quarterly copy of *The UCB Word For Today* free of charge – see the back page for more details.

DAY 1 Living together in harmony

'Love is patient, love is kind...'
1 Corinthians 13:4 NIV

THE FOUNDATION of any good relationship is commitment, communication and compromise. Work on respecting your differences. Don't tell your wife her Christmas decorations are silly or a waste of money. Her delight in them may be rooted in some childhood memory or a need to have now what she didn't have then. If you love her, just make sure the lights are all ready to hang up by early December.

Some of us have difficulty accepting differences. Before we came to Christ we were hell-raisers. Now we can't eat dinner at our brother-in-law's house because he doesn't say grace or we throw our teenager out on the street because he or she listens to heavy metal. If Christ lives in your heart, shouldn't you have more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and all those other spiritual virtues than anybody else in the house? (See Galatians 5:22.)

When it comes to communication, observe these four rules: (1) Focus on what you shouldn't say as well as what you should. If you tell somebody everything you think before you've really thought it through, you'll be in trouble for sure. Not everything needs to be said; some things should be kept to yourself. (2) Don't speak in anger. Emotional outbursts can result in hurtful comments you may not mean at the time and will later regret. (3) Be careful what you say when you're tired. Exhaustion lowers your guard and makes you careless. (4) Always wait until your judgement is clear. Think things through before you speak. That's what's called 'living together'.

Prayer Point

Help me Lord, to be wise enough to know what to say and when, even when I'm being shown hostility and anger; help me make the right decision in my reply to build that family member up, not tear them down. Help me always to have the family as a team in focus, so that we work together, and to remember that even when it's rough with one person there is still a team to help everyone get through. Amen.

DAY 2 Teamwork pays

'Love is patient, love is kind...'
1 Corinthians 13:4 NIV

YOUR FAMILY is like a team: you win only when you're willing to accept the strengths and weaknesses of each player. That includes you too. You're not perfect and you're not called to 'fix' everybody, so cut it out! Maybe your spouse is a disaster in the kitchen but they keep a spotless house and the garden's the envy of the neighbourhood. Don't put them down because you've been cooking since you were old enough to reach the stove. No, take the vegetables that are grown and create a meal that makes both the cook and the gardener look good!

never score. Build on your strengths and minimise your weaknesses! And learn to accept reality! Some people will never change. You can waste years complaining, causing rifts and driving yourself crazy over them or you can adjust your expectations and be a lot happier. If somebody's disorganised, don't ask them to arrange your next dinner party. Get somebody you can depend on. When you learn to do that, a 'less than ideal' family can become a source of comfort and love, seeing you through a lifetime of experiences.

Teams don't necessarily win because they have the best players; they win because they can work together. In football even the best player needs other team members to get him the ball, otherwise he'll

Don't bail out when things are bad. A family's like a stock market – bulls and bears! Wait a little longer! Let God work and things will turn out for everybody's good!

DAY 3 The huddle

'I appeal to you... in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another' **1 Corinthians 1:10 NIV**

TO LEAD YOUR FAMILY effectively, you need to learn how to huddle regularly. The 'huddle' is where a team: (1) sets its goals, (2) discusses the division of responsibilities, (3) tackles the issues that determine whether it wins or loses. Parent, even though you call the plays from overhead, your family must be taught how to accomplish them on the field. That means working through things, talking through the disagreements and motivating and appreciating each member.

Try to listen with an open heart. Don't just hear what your children say, try to understand how they feel. Yes, you're the boss and yes, you can act like the Gestapo and enforce your will if you want to but

sooner or later you'll have trouble, for resentment grows when people feel left out. Every member of your team has got to be part of the decision-making process. Involve them! Ask God to help you look beyond what you want to what's best for all of you. Don't fall under the spell of instant gratification. What looks good to you today could be taking you off the path to a better tomorrow.

Don't let 'outsiders' into your huddle. Tell them to stay in their own. Too often their opinions are based on hearsay, self-interest or jealousy. Respect the privacy of your team. Build loyalty. Huddle regularly in prayer. When you do that, everybody wins!

Prayer Point

Help our family to be more open Lord, so we could all talk through issues that arise without anyone feeling hurt or left out. Help my influence as a parent to be positive and uplifting; help me, Lord, to steer clear of putting pressure on the family, which I know is wrong. Teach me, Lord, how to pray for my family and how to be an example of Your Kingdom there. Amen.

DAY 4 When a mother prays

'I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him' **1 Samuel 1:27 NIV**

EVERY TERRORIST was once a child. So was every missionary. The only difference between them is the influence of a parent. Samuel the Prophet led the nation of Israel for 40 years and guided King David in some of his most crucial decisions, but who was the dominant influence in his life? His mother! Listen, 'Now I am giving him to the LORD, and he will belong to the LORD his whole life' (1 Samuel 1:28 NLT).

While you have your children, hold them, love them, care for them and empower them but understand that you are a steward, not an owner. Your children belong to God, not you! Some day they will grow up and leave. Make sure that when they do, they have a spiritual anchor because life will give them lots of storms. Never underestimate the power that comes

when a parent pleads with God on behalf of a child. Who knows how many prayers are being answered right now because of the faithful pondering of a mother 10 or 20 years ago?

If what you are doing in the fast-paced society is taking you away from prayer time for your children, you're doing too much! There is nothing more special, more precious, than the time a parent spends interceding with God on behalf of a child. It's not too late for the child who has brought you tears. Think of Jesus' mother who had to watch her son crucified but also had the joy of seeing Him raised from the dead. You may go to your grave wondering if your prayers will ever be answered but don't stop praying. Why? Because when mothers pray, God listens!

DAY 5 As the twig is bent...

'Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it' **Proverbs 22:6 NLT**

AS THE TWIG IS BENT, so goes the tree. Eighty per cent of your child's character is formed by the age of five. Ruth Simmons is living proof. As a child she told one of her classmates, 'Someday I'll be a college president.' That was remarkable, coming from the twelfth child of Texas sharecroppers. Little did Ruth Simmons know that it would be the presidency of Smith College in Massachusetts, one of the nation's finest schools. Actually, she's the first African-American woman to head a top-ranked college. Since female presidents, specifically black ones, are rare, let's take a closer look. Most success stories begin with parents. In this case, the emphasis is on a mother who stressed the importance of hard work.

Ruth says, 'I worked hard at everything I did – and not necessarily because I was interested in good grades, or looking for praise. No, I worked hard because that's what I was always taught to do.'

Peter Rose, a member of the college search committee, said, 'We wanted to cast the widest possible net, for the best possible person. What convinced us that she was right for the job was: her work ethic, her character, her strong academic performance, and the force of her personality.' Parent, if you'll take God with one hand and your child with the other, there's no telling how far they'll go!

Prayer Point

Lord, help me to build character in the lives of my children; help me to clearly demonstrate to them what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, how to act and react in different situations. Lord, let me learn these ten commandments of parenthood, that I can influence my children for Your Kingdom, to stand upright and strong and also to stand for what is right and just in a changing world. Amen.

DAY 6 Ten Commandments for parents

'Children are God's best gift' **Psalms 127:3 TM**

IF YOU'RE A PARENT, read this. Better yet, keep it where you can read it regularly:

- (1) My hands are small; don't expect perfection whenever I make a bed, draw a picture or throw a ball. My legs are short; slow down so that I can keep up with you.
- (2) My eyes have not seen the world as yours have; let me explore it safely; don't restrict me unnecessarily.
- (3) Make time for me. Housework will always be there; I'm little only once.
- (4) I have feelings too; don't nag me about my inquisitiveness. Treat me as you'd like to be treated.
- (5) I'm a gift; treasure me as God intended. Hold me accountable, give me guidelines to live by, discipline me with love.

(6) I need encouragement to grow, not empty praise. Go easy, you can correct the things I do without putting me down.

(7) Give me the freedom to make decisions, even if they're not always right. Permit me to fall, so that I can learn to walk.

(8) Don't do things repeatedly for me; that makes me feel like my efforts don't measure up to your expectations. Don't compare me with others; I'm me, not them.

(9) Don't be afraid to leave for a weekend together. Kids need time away from parents, just like parents need it from kids. Besides, it shows us that your marriage is something special.

(10) Take me to God's house and introduce me to Him because I'll need Him for the rest of my life.

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DAY 7 Hints for a happy home

'Love is always supportive, loyal, hopeful, and trusting.'
1 Corinthians 13:7 CEV

HERE ARE TEN REASONS why relationships fail. Read them slowly and grade yourself: (1) communication breaks down, (2) truth is violated, (3) integrity is forsaken, (4) time isn't invested, (5) risks aren't taken, (6) control is the goal, (7) trust is broken, (8) self-interest is the rule, (9) manipulation is allowed, (10) God is ignored.

Well, how did you do? Before you answer, here are three hints to help you do better: (1) Become a good listener. James writes, 'be quick to listen [and] slow to speak' (James 1:19 NIV). Sometimes the greatest gift you can give is to listen and listen with your heart. You don't need to say a word; just 'being there' is enough. (2) Speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Nobody likes to be corrected

but when you're heading down the wrong road or settling for less than your potential, love will 'get in your face'. If you truly care about someone, you'll 'speak the truth in love' to them. (3) Always believe the best. Love sees you at your worst but never forgets your best; thinks you're a little bit more wonderful than you really are; will talk with you endlessly or just sit with you in silence; is happier about your success than you are; cares about you enough to say what it really means; doesn't try to know more, act smarter or be your constant teacher and listens, even when what you have to say is not particularly interesting. Why? Because love believes you're important!

Prayer Point

Help me to listen to the needs of my family, Lord, not to just presume I know what is going through everyone's hearts and minds. Help me Lord, to take time to hear what is being said and understand the need in everyone. Lord, when those conversations get tough, I pray that I could exercise unconditional love, love that knows no boundaries, but love that conquers every issue and problem. Amen.

DAY 8 Unconditional love

'While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him' Luke 15:20 NIV

WHEN PASTOR HAMAN CROSS'S unmarried daughter told him she was pregnant, he was stunned. He'd written a book called Sanctified Sex and travelled the nation preaching 'Just Say No!' Now he was spending his nights listening to his wife sobbing and his days refereeing family feuds. He wrote: 'I asked God, "How do I model sensitivity and strength when my family's falling apart?" God replied, "Will you quit loving your daughter... investing in her... forgiving her, as you've been forgiven?" My answer continues to be, "No, Lord, with your help we'll make it."'

left home and a caring dad who 'left the light on' for his return. What can you learn from him? (1) He was a great role model for his kids. (2) He supported them financially and emotionally. (3) He gave them a heritage. (4) He guided them without forcing them to conform. (5) He gave them room to fail and a place to return. (6) He met them more than halfway. (7) He forgave them.

It's not an indictment of you when your kids struggle, make bad choices or challenge authority. What does reflect on you, however, is your attitude towards them. They may still be 'a great way off' but they need to know that you care and that you're waiting to welcome them back home.

James Dobson says, 'Raising children's like baking a cake – you don't realise you have a disaster on your hands until it's too late!' In Luke 15, there's a parable about a rebellious kid who

DAY 9 Work on your relationship

'No matter what I say... and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love' 1 Corinthians 13:3 TM

BY THE TIME Ted and Bessie celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary, Ted's hearing was about half gone. When the crowd left, Bessie looked at him and said, 'I'm so proud of you, Ted.' Confused and upset, he looked back at her and said, 'Well, Bessie, I'm tired of you too!'

If you don't want to get tired of each other, keep doing these four things: (1) Take responsibility for your own happiness. By blaming others you never have to face yourself or change your behaviour. That's a cop-out! Relationships aren't dumping grounds. Happiness is an inside job; it comes from a healthy self-esteem and a growing relationship with God. (2) Be a friend. Ever notice how easily you accept your friends as they are yet have trouble doing the same thing with your loved

ones? Look out, familiarity breeds contempt. Don't they deserve the same respect, loyalty, tolerance and appreciation? (3) Share your dreams. Doing this will enrich your relationship and take it to a new level. You'll always need something to plan for and work toward together. What's your next goal? (4) Have courage. Doctor Theodore Rubin says, 'The problem is not that there are problems, it's expecting otherwise, thinking that having problems is the problem!'

There are no perfect situations. You need courage to face whatever comes; to realise that what you can't solve, together you can outlive! Outside of your relationship with God, there's no greater joy than having a good relationship with the one you love, so work on yours today!

Prayer Point

Lord, never let me blame others for how I feel, but instead let me embrace change to help me feel better. Show me Lord, the areas of my life that need to be altered, and help me have the courage to change what needs to be changed to feel better about myself. Remind me Lord, of Your heart for marriage and family, and help me once again to find a place to celebrate all the great things You have done in our lives. Amen.

DAY 10 Covenant marriage

'They are no longer two but one' Matthew 19:6 NIV

FOUR WORDS SAID IT ALL. They appeared in bold type in the window of a Hollywood jewellery store: 'We rent wedding rings.' God sees marriage differently. God's a covenant God, the Bible's a covenant book, we're covenant people and marriage is intended to be a covenant relationship. It's a lifetime agreement between two people in which 'I' becomes 'we'. It involves sacrifice. It takes dying to self for a marriage to live. It requires total surrender; the merging of one life into another. The leading causes of divorce are: (a) selfishness and (b) unrealistic expectations.

John Powell writes, 'Divorces result from romanticised expectations. Jack thinks being married to Jill will be utter bliss. But after the wedding bells have become an echo, the truth sets in: moodiness, weight gain, burned dinners, hair curlers. He wonders how he ever got into this. Secretly he thinks she deceived him.

'Before marriage, Jill thought it would be heaven to be married to Jack. Now there's cigarette ash, addiction to sports, painful insensitivity; she cries a lot and looks up Marriage Counsellors in the Yellow Pages. Unrealistic expectations are a parade that always gets rained on. Sorry, Camelot and the perfect mate don't exist. Marriage is just two imperfect people building permanently, giving totally, in partnership with a perfect God.'

Listen: 'they are no longer two but one' (Matthew 19:6 NIV). The Greek interpretation of the word 'united' is 'glued together'. If yours is a covenant marriage, it won't come unstuck when the pressure is on!

DAY 11 Love must be fed

'They are no longer two but one' Matthew 19:6 NIV

MARRIAGE IS not so much about finding the right person as becoming the right person. If you don't keep growing together you'll grow apart. It's inevitable. Marriage is a covenant, not a contract. There's a big difference! Contracts won't sustain the pain, the pitfalls and the pressures. They focus only on 'what I can get'. Contracts are enforced by courts but covenants are enforced by character. One requires the giving of your name, the other the giving of your life.

Look around you: all the best ideas come from the God who said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). Then He introduced Eve. Notice, she was not made from Adam's head to top him or his feet to be trampled on by him, but out of his

side to be equal with him; from under his arm to be protected by him; and from near his heart to be loved by him.

What causes love to grow cold? Chuck Swindoll writes: 'It isn't one action or one word but a series of little unresolved spats that now make television the solution to the problems of a hard day and silence us when we should say, "Thank you," or "I'm sorry," or, "You look really nice today." We no longer say, "I love you," because those words mock the special meaning they once had. It's too painful to remember that those feelings we said we'd never lose were, tear by tear, left in the past.' Today, do something to make your marriage stronger!

Prayer Point

Father, help me to appreciate my family each and every day, even if it's spending a few minutes before sleeping, giving You thanks for everything You have provided for the love between us, for Your mercy and grace. Help me teach my children Your ways, and Your heart, that they might be ambassadors in Your Kingdom, to reach the lost, feed the poor, love the unloved in Jesus' Name. Amen.

DAY 12 Q & A for parents

'Your children will have God for their teacher – what a mentor.' Isaiah 54:13 TM

IN THE EARLY 1800S, the Swiss educator, Johann Pestalozzi, wrote, 'The best way for a child to learn about God is to know a real Christian. The best way for them to discover the power of prayer is to live with parents who pray and truly walk with God.' Right!

Eighty-five per cent of all children raised this way develop a strong personal faith before they're 13. 'Am I responsible for my child's spiritual choices?' Ultimately no. Potentially, yes! If you want to take the spiritual temperature of any family, stick a thermometer in the mouth of the parents. 'But my kids are already grown up. Isn't it too late?' No. God's name is 'Redeemer'. He can give you another chance. Repent; commit your life to Christ. That's how generational cycles of failure are broken and God is brought back into the picture.

'But what if I'm afraid to bring a child into this evil world?' That's the whole point; it's children of the light who push back the darkness. Instead of reacting out of fear or convenience, use your family to impact the world.

'But how can I compete with the negative influences around me?' Every study confirms that a parent has by far the greatest influence; greater than friends, school or the media in determining the character and direction of a child. Parents, invest every shred of your energy into seeing that your children cross the finish line for God. You have no higher calling than that!

DAY 13 Hallmarks of a great dad

'The glory of children is their father'
Proverbs 17:6 NKJ

BOSWELL, THE FAMOUS BIOGRAPHER, tells of a day when his dad took him fishing. Later, when he read what his father had written in his journal, he found only one sentence: 'Today went fishing with my son; a day wasted!' He was devastated!

Solomon says, '...the glory of children is their father' (Proverbs 17:6 NKJ). Here are six hallmarks of a great dad: (1) He protects: he guards his children physically when they're young and emotionally as they mature. He teaches his sons to respect girls and interviews the guys who date his daughter. (2) He listens, unlike the kid who told his Mum, 'I'm gonna be just like Dad when I grow up. My eyebrows are already growing together and when people talk to me I don't listen!' Listening builds a lifetime bridge to your child's heart.

Prayer Point

Lord, let me be a parent to my full potential, so that my children will see a real example of someone who loves You, loves them, and loves family. Never let me grow too proud to say to my kids, 'I love you' and help me always invest time in them, even during those busy days. Lord, thank You for the privilege of my family, and I know I'll be on the right track if I continue to follow You. Amen.

DAY 14 The generational slide

'As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord'
Joshua 24:15 NIV

APPROACHING THE END of his life, Joshua calls the nation's leaders together and says: 'You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done' (Joshua 23:3 NIV). Then he throws down the gauntlet; 'choose... whom you will serve' (Joshua 24:15 NIV).

What did they do? 'Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua' (Joshua 24:31 NIV). So far, so good! But take a closer look. They served Him partly, only when it was to their advantage. The one military action remaining to be taken after Joshua's death was to clean out the last pockets of pagan worship. But Israel did not 'drive out the inhabitants...' (Judges 1:27 NKJ). While Joshua had been fully committed to God, the elders were only partly committed. The result? Their sons and daughters began to intermarry with their neighbours and adopt their lifestyle.

(3) He's affectionate: nothing communicates security and worth to your kids like holding them. If you grew up without it, make sure they don't. (4) He disciplines: He doesn't just discipline his children; he models self-discipline. (5) He's fun: he's not so preoccupied that he's a drag to be around. Remember, 'A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit' (Proverbs 15:13 NIV), so show your kids your lighter side! (6) He 'walks the walk':

Former atheist, Lee Strobel, says, 'When I became a Christian, my five-year-old daughter said, "Mummy, I want God to do for me what he's done for Daddy," and she gave her life to Jesus.' When you walk the walk before your kids, it changes everything.

Listen: 'Another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord... they provoked the Lord to anger... They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way' (Judges 2:10-12,19 NKJ). What had shaped their spiritual values? The compromise of their parents! This is called the generational slide. It helps us to understand how our parents impacted us and predicts how our commitments or the lack of them, will shape our children.

Parent, you get the first crack at it. Give your children deep spiritual roots as early as possible. That way, if they rebel later, they'll still have memories and values to return to. Don't just tell them about God; model a godly lifestyle before them every day!

DAY 15 How it is – how it ought to be!

'Husbands, love your wives'
Ephesians 5:25 NIV

FIRST, HOW IT IS. Consider the seven stages of a cold marriage. The first year the husband says, 'Sugar, I'm worried about you. You've got a bad sniffle. I want to put you into the hospital for a complete check-up. I know the food's lousy but I've arranged for your meals to be sent in from Rossini's.' The second year: 'Honey, I don't like the sound of that cough. I've called Dr. Miller and he's coming right over. Now will you go to bed like a good girl, just for me, please?' The third year: 'Maybe you'd better lie down, honey. Nothing like a little rest if you're feeling bad. I'll bring you something to eat. Have we got any soup in the house?' The fourth year: 'Look, dear, be sensible. After you've fed the kids and washed the dishes, you'd better hit the sack.' The fifth year: 'Why

don't you take a couple of aspirins?' The sixth year: 'If you'd just gargle or something, instead of sitting around barking like a seal.' The seventh year: 'For goodness sake, stop that sneezing. What are you trying to do, give me pneumonia?'

Now, how it ought to be! 'Husbands, go all out in love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church – a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything He does and says is designed to bring the best out of her... And that is how husbands ought to love their wives' (Ephesians 5:25-27 TM).

Prayer Point

Lord, I pray I would never develop a negative view of my spouse. I thank You, God, for the day we married and I pray that You help me keep a great outlook of our marriage for the rest of my life. With my children, Lord, help me love them enough to know when to discipline them, to see where the line is to be drawn. In that discipline help me only do what is right before You, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

DAY 16 Dare to discipline!

'Discipline your son... If you don't, you will ruin his life' Proverbs 19:18

WHEN ALLIED TROOPS captured a young American fighting alongside the Taliban, a major American newspaper wrote: 'The parents of John Walker Lindh, the child of privilege turned Taliban terrorist, didn't put their foot down when he announced he was going to drop out of school, didn't interfere when he decided to become a Muslim, were actually proud of him for pursuing an alternative course. His mother said it was 'good for a child to find a passion.' They didn't object when he asked them to pay his way to Yemen or when his new circle of friends included gunmen. As long as he could remember, his oh-so-progressive parents had answered 'Yes' to his every whim, every fancy and every passion. The only thing they insisted on was that nothing be insisted on.

Newsweek called it 'truly perplexing' that Walker was attracted to this narrow, intolerant sect. There's nothing perplexing about it! He craved standards and discipline. Mum and Dad didn't offer any; the Taliban did! If his parents had been less concerned with open-mindedness and more concerned with developing their son's moral judgment, he wouldn't have ended up where he did. His road to ruin didn't begin in Afghanistan; it began with parents who never said, 'No!' Listen: 'Discipline your son in his early years while there is hope. If you don't you [not he] will ruin his life' (Proverbs 19:18 TLB). Dare to discipline – your child's life depends on it!

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DAY 17 'Helper hints' from husbands 'God said... I will make a helper suitable for him' Genesis 2:18 NIV

STUDY THESE 'helper hints' and improve your relationship: (1) I need to come home to a place of peace where I can recover from a bad day, without getting hit with stress the moment I walk in. (2) I love it when she touches me, rubs my back, stands close to me. Her touch is my medicine. (3) Be more patient with me in social situations. Don't talk for me and don't try to put me right in front of others. (4) When we go through tough times don't make me feel like a loser. That's so important to me. (5) Treat me like an adult – maybe even a friend you'd like to get to know better. That kind of respect goes a long way. (6) A simple dinner with my wife and kids around the table; that's family to me. All of

us together talking about whatever. We could be having beans and hot dogs; it doesn't matter. (7) She cares about my sexual needs; never shames me or says no; I mean, a rainc heck's fine, but she always makes me feel wanted. (8) She never tries to make me perform spiritually – like public praying or speaking up at church. I'm awkward with that stuff and she understands. That's cool. It actually helps me want to grow in my faith. (9) She shares my goals; asks me about them constantly. They're at the top of her prayer list. She helps me watch for what God might be doing to help make them come true.' (These rules work both ways!)

Prayer Point

Lord, help me to never lose the sense of loving and serving my husband. Help me to remember it's about us, not just me, and sometimes the day will be about him. Help me to see that we are building a legacy together, that we are a team that can influence the people and circumstance around us for You, Lord. Help my focus remain on what's important and not what's trivial, so we will grow in grace together in Jesus' Name. Amen.

DAY 18 Your legacy 'Did he not make them one? ...And why one? He seeks godly offspring' Malachi 2:15 NIV (1984)

GOD'S TOP REASON for marriage isn't: (1) Sex. (2) Combining incomes. (3) Getting invited to more parties. (4) Bigger tax allowances. (5) Raising well-adjusted, educated, successful children. No, in God's mind, marriage is to be the starting point for populating the world with people who'll serve Him.

Think: that tiny creature who sleeps when you're awake and is wide awake when you're asleep, has a set of lungs that could drown out Concorde, whose face it is easy to forget because you spend so much time at the other end – is your greatest mission field.

Think of it as a relay race. Success isn't based on how well you run as an individual but on how well

you pass the baton. Only when the story of future generations is told will you know if you 'won' or 'lost.' David says, 'Since my youth, God, you have taught me... Even when I'm old... do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come' (Psalm 71:17–18 NIV).

Don't drop the baton! Make your goal to raise children who'll pick up your legacy of faith and take it further than you ever did. Mum, Dad, God's asking you today, 'Will you fulfil My plan for you by passing on a legacy of godliness and truth to the generation now cooing in your arms or playing at your feet?' What a challenge!

DAY 19 Parents – wake up!

'We will tell the next generation'
Psalm 78:4 NIV

PARENTS, WAKE UP! You wouldn't permit a porno theatre in your neighbourhood, yet the enemy has taken the information highway and used it to transport his filth right into your child's bedroom – legally!

If we're to save our children, we've got to make sure what we say matches what we're doing to make it happen. You can't just close your eyes and hope for the best. You can't delegate this responsibility to the childcare centre, the schoolteacher, the scoutmaster or even the church youth leader. You can't solve the problem by buying your kids more stuff. You can't sacrifice them for your career, assuming that if there's no crisis underfoot at home, everything must be fine. No, the best defence is a good offence.

Prayer Point

Father, help me guard my children from the sin of the world, help me be wise about what they watch and listen to, the books they read and the friends they hang out with. Never allow me to be lazy when it comes to the input my kids are getting. Father, also help my wisdom when it comes to issues in the family I've never gone through or don't know the answers for, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

DAY 20 All in the family

'Obey his laws... So that things will go well for you and your children'
Deuteronomy 4:40 NCV

PERIODICALLY WE ALL need a jolt to wake us up to the less-than-ideal way we treat our family members. John Maxwell tells of a man he met through Promise Keepers. One day, the man's daughter, who was in year one, was asked by her teacher to draw a picture of her family. She loved to draw so she willingly tackled the assignment.

That evening she proudly brought her artwork home and showed it to her parents. When her dad looked at the picture he said, 'What's this picture of?' His daughter replied, 'That's us and our house. The teacher asked me to draw a picture of our family.' He looked at the picture more carefully

and saw that every one was there except him. 'Sweetheart,' he asked, 'Am I in the picture?' 'No,' she replied. 'Why not?' he asked. 'Because this is a picture of us at home and you're never here.'

It was as if she'd dropped the piano on him! She'd stated a simple fact without malice or any desire to inflict guilt. That was the day he decided he was going to turn his bus around and head back to his family. If you've been travelling down the road to success but neglected to bring your family along, it's time to make a U-turn. Go back and pick up the people who matter most! Commit yourself to travelling only on a journey that includes them!

Mark the following Scriptures. The first addresses the paedophile and pornographer: 'If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!' (Matthew 18:6–7 NIV). The second is for parents: 'Things we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from [our] children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power, and the wonders He has done' (Psalm 78:3–4 NIV). Noah 'saved his family' (Hebrews 11:7 TLB). Make sure you do yours!

DAY 21 Trouble-shooting at home

'Enjoy life with your wife [and your husband], whom you love'
Ecclesiastes 9:9 NIV

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN said, 'Those things that hurt, instruct.' If we're to grow as families, to be as successful there as we are in other areas, we must learn how to cope with difficulties at home. Marriages start because of love but they continue because of commitment.

Here are some suggestions for trouble-shooting at home: (1) Attack the problem, not the person! You're all on the same team, so don't take your frustrations out on your loved ones. (2) Get all the facts. Before you offer (or impose) solutions, make sure you really understand the problem. Think before you speak. Nothing's more damaging than jumping to conclusions. (3) List all your options. When you do, you'll be less emotional and more objective. That's how you'd handle it, if you had

a problem at work, so why not do the same for your family? (4) Look for the positives. Scott Peck writes, 'It's only because of problems that we grow mentally and spiritually. It's through the pain of confronting and resolving them that we learn.' No matter how bad things seem at the time, every situation holds something positive, so look for it. (5) Never withhold your love. No matter how bad things get, never withhold your love. It's OK to tell your family how you feel, so long as you do it graciously and make sure they know that you love them unconditionally despite the problems. Why? When people feel loved and supported, they can weather just about any crisis!

Prayer Point

Lord, help me to never hold a grudge, and if I have already got a list of things that have hurt me since we've been married, help me to let them go and never return to my memory again. Help me to build on the positives and overcome the negatives in our relationship, that we would have great communication with each other with our family and friends, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

DAY 22 Meaningful communication

'Be gentle with one another, sensitive'
Ephesians 4:32 TM

THE AVERAGE COUPLE spends about 37 minutes a week in meaningful communication. They spend five times more each day watching television! No wonder we're in trouble! Like anything else, good communication doesn't just happen; it must be developed and that takes time and effort.

Want to communicate better? Here's how: (1) Build platforms for communication. Be creative. Take walks together as a family. Call your partner during the day. Try to meet for lunch once a week. Drive the kids to soccer practice so you can talk to them. Communication can happen anywhere. (2) Control communication killers. TVs and phones are the chief culprits. Restrict the time you give them and you'll be amazed how much more time you'll have together.

(3) Encourage honesty and transparency. Differences of opinion are healthy and normal in any family. Encourage every member to speak his or her mind, and, when they do, don't criticise or retaliate. (4) Adopt a positive communication style. Be conscious of the way you interact with your family. You may unwittingly have adopted a style that stifles communication. The fastest way to do this is to: (a) retaliate; that has a degrading effect; (b) dominate; that has an intimidating effect; (c) isolate, go off in a huff; that has a frustrating effect. Instead, cooperate; that has an encouraging effect. If you're in the habit of using any communication style other than a cooperative one, start working immediately to change it. You'll have to if you want to build a good relationship with your family.

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DAY 23 Godly parents – ungodly children ‘He did evil in the eyes of the Lord’ 2 Kings 21:2 NIV

HEZEKIAH WAS one of the most righteous kings in Israel’s history. Yet his son, Manasseh, seduced God’s people into doing ‘more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed’ (2 Kings 21:9 NIV).

Why didn’t this father’s righteousness pass on to his son? Here are three reasons worth considering: (1) Good parents sometimes have prodigal children (Luke 15:11). Don’t let anybody ‘guilt-trip’ you about your children or make you feel like a failure. Your example can still influence them, your prayers can still mould them and your love can keep the door open for God to work in their lives. (2) Bad company can destroy good character! Manasseh was evidently weak-willed and easily influenced

by the wrong people. Teach your children that their company will shape their conduct, their character and ultimately, their destiny (Proverbs 1:10). (3) This father was too busy. Sound familiar? While you still have your children under your roof, make time to pray, play and talk together.

‘Talk about what?’ you say. Personal responsibility: in an era where passing the buck has become an art form, teach them to accept responsibility for their choices. And emphasise ‘the erosion principle.’ Explain to them that evil is becoming (a) increasingly worse (b) more cleverly disguised (c) easier to get into (d) harder to get out of. And whatever you do, never give up on them!

Prayer Point

Lord, help me to continually focus on the needs of my family, help me to immediately realise when I need to put more effort into any aspect of the relationships we have. Always let me spend enough time with everyone, and let me just be overflowing in love. Protect my family from the evil one, Lord, that we would grow strong together in the things of God. Amen.

DAY 24 Mature Love ‘Love never fails’ 1 Corinthians 13:8 NIV

MATURE LOVE, the kind that enables two people to go the distance, is spelled out clearly in 1 Corinthians 13. You need to read it regularly. It tells us that: (1) Mature love is tolerant. It knows that a relationship is a package deal; you enjoy what’s good and develop patience by learning to live with what’s still under construction. (2) Mature love is never envious. It understands that real contentment comes from knowing that God has a plan for each of us and what He’s got for you, He’ll never give to anybody else. (3) Mature love is courteous. In a world where good manners are in short supply, it knows that the value you place on something is evidenced by how you treat it. (4) Mature love is not touchy. It knows that if you wear your feelings on your sleeve, you’ll go broke buying paper tissues.

Mark how Paul describes mature love in The Message: ‘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’ (1 Corinthians 13:4–8 TM). Today, ask God to give you that kind of love!

DO YOU NEED PRAYER?

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DAY 25 Dad – be there!

‘He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children’ **Malachi 4:6 NIV**

ALMOST 20 MILLION children in America grow up without a father; 75 per cent of them in poverty. It gets worse; these children are five times more likely to commit suicide, ten times more likely to take drugs and 20 times more likely to go to prison.

Luther Burbank said, ‘If we paid as much attention to our plants as we do our children, we’d be living in a jungle of weeds.’

Father, answer these three questions: (1) Are you giving your children things instead of yourself? By the time they’re 12, they’ll have learned 75 per cent of all they’ll ever know. The question is who will their teachers be? Television? Some drugged-out rap artist? Their peers? As the twig is bent, so grows the tree. (2) Are you giving your best to your career or to them? If

Prayer Point

Father, forgive me for my broken promises, when I said I would be there and wasn’t, give me the backbone to say sorry and the determination to never allow a promise to be broken again. Lord, when things have gone wrong, help me to never use excuses to pass off the hurt I might have caused. Let my yes be yes and my no be no. Let my godly character be displayed in my family, in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

DAY 26 Maintenance and repairs

‘Let us think about each other and... Show love’ **Hebrews 10:24 NCV**

THERE ARE FEW THINGS better than a good marriage or worse than a bad one. Sadly, most fall into the in-between category: just mediocre. Why? They’ve gone too long without maintenance and repairs. How’s yours today? Has it quietly fashioned itself into a smooth well-worn rut? Do you take each other for granted or do you, like the ones that ‘go the distance,’ find new ways of renewing your love and keeping the relationship fresh?

Sam Levison said, ‘Love at first sight is nothing special. It’s when two people have been looking at each other for 25 years that it becomes a miracle.’

you spend all your energy at work and leave none for your family, you’ll pay a high price. Remember, you get only one bite at the apple. Your children will grow up either to resent you, repeat your mistakes or rejoice in the memory of a home where love was spelled ‘T–I–M–E.’ (3) Are you setting a spiritual tone for your family? Or does your wife run circles around you in this area? Thank God for mothers who ‘stand in the gap,’ but the Bible holds fathers responsible for the spiritual training of their children.

Listen: ‘Fathers... bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord’ (Ephesians 6:4 NIV). Ten or twenty years from now, what are you going to wish you’d done today? Start doing it!

Listen: ‘Wives, understand and support your husbands... Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives’ (Ephesians 5:22–25 TM).

Max Lucado writes, ‘Someday is a snake whose tongue has mastered the talk of deception. “Someday,” it hisses, “I’ll take her on that cruise... we’ll have time to sit and chat...” But you know the truth before I even write it, don’t you? Someday never comes! Wise up! Invest the time. Send the flowers. Write the letter. Make the apology. Take the trip. Purchase the gift. Do it! The seized opportunity brings joy – the neglected one brings only regret!’

DAY 27 How’s your volume level?

‘People with good sense restrain their anger; they earn esteem by overlooking wrongs’ **Proverbs 19:11 NLT**

THE EMOTIONAL INTENSITY level in your home is like the volume on your radio; when it’s set too high, you live in an atmosphere of continual crisis. One disagreement and you’re headed for the divorce court. Your child misses their curfew by five minutes and it’s World War III and let’s not even talk about how you behave when you’re behind the wheel of a car!

Listen: ‘Do not be quickly provoked... for anger resides in the lap of fools’ (Ecclesiastes 7:9 NIV). So, how’s your volume level these days? When it’s set too high, your emotions dictate your reactions, you talk without thinking and you leave a trail of bitterness and pain. Dad, every time you storm out of the house

because you don’t get what you want, when you want it, the way you want it, has it occurred to you that you’re teaching your children to do the same? Mum, when your daughter hears you say, ‘All men are alike; they’re no good,’ has it dawned on you that she might grow up never trusting or allowing herself to be emotionally available to anybody? How will you feel living with that? Reduce the volume! Lower the intensity level! Destinies are being shaped by your words, your behaviour, and your attitudes. God says, ‘Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret – it leads only to evil’ (Psalm 37:8 NIV). Today, listen to what He’s telling you!

Prayer Point

Lord, if only I could live in a sea of calm and not storms. Help me learn how to handle situations that rile me up, help me rely on You for strength, grace and love, and Lord, help me overcome the devil, who wants as much stress as possible in my life. I intend to be the best parent I can be, with Your help and in Your Name. Amen.

DAY 28 Mix and match

‘Bearing with one another in love’ **Ephesians 4:2 NIV**

SINGLE PARENT, if you’re fortunate enough to meet someone you want to marry, seek God’s help from the outset. Mergers are challenging enough but add visitation rights, custodial care, court intervention and ex-in-law meddling and it can be like negotiating an international peace treaty!

Here are the questions that should be asked when you attempt to blend two families: Do you take these children to be your brothers and sisters? Do you promise to accept this new mum or dad, keeping ties with your biological parent while still obeying your step-parent every day? Do you promise to share the toys your father bought you, with the child of the man your mother just married? You can’t just turn your child’s

world upside down, then say, ‘Play nicely.’ Children need time to digest the situation and adjust to it. Indeed, some of them may never adjust and you must help them through it and love them regardless.

If you want the merger to be as painless and stress-free as possible, try to do these four things: (1) Give yourself totally: half measures and successful families don’t go together. (2) Talk less and listen more. (3) Be patient; it may take years to win a child’s love and respect, not to mention healing the scars of the past and erasing the fears of the future. (4) Pray! Pray! Pray! Even if it doesn’t change them, it’ll change you and that could be the best thing for all concerned.

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