

A Heart for Parenting

“We haven’t been able to revive her. You need to pray!” After about ten minutes of anxious waiting, that was the first medical report I had heard. I had felt a sense of dread for several hours already that night, and this announcement only made it more acute. Maybe that is common—I don’t know—but I had an overwhelming feeling that I was going to lose either my wife or my baby girl.

I’m sure my fears would have seemed unfounded just minutes before. It had seemed like a routine delivery, but within minutes our whole lives came crashing down. The baby’s heart rate suddenly dropped, and we were rushed into the operating room. I heard the doctor yelling, “Get the father away from the door,” but I stood and watched anyway. The last words my wife heard were, “Knife up, stat!” and she drifted into unconsciousness. Kathleen was split open on the operating table before me, and our baby, Brea, was pulled out. Brea was taken just out of my sight into a corner of the room; however, I could still see some of the doctors and nurses attending her.

After several minutes, when I realized that they were still treating her, I actually thought, “Everything must be okay. She must still be alive.” Only when I was asked to pray for my baby did I realize that they were working on her in a desperate panic and not as part of normal routine.

Another ten minutes passed before my fears were con-

*Nine months
of hope, love,
plans, prayers,
and dreams
died all
at once.*

firmed. Brea had passed away just before being delivered. I held her in my arms, but I knew she wasn’t there. When Kathleen woke up, I had to tell her that Brea had died. It ripped my heart out. Nine months of hope, love, plans, prayers, and dreams died all at once. We cried all night long. In the morning I went home and told our other three children.

More tears. More pain.

Kathleen and I dealt with a flood of emotions over the next several months. It was hard to imagine how God could allow such a thing to happen. We had previously been devastated by the loss of three children due to miscarriage and, quite frankly, we thought God knew that we had been through enough.

Of course over time we realized that God had never promised to keep us from pain. We had an expectation on God that was unrealistic. We wanted this world to be what the next is supposed to be. In fact, heaven is described as being exactly what we were looking for—a place where God will wipe every tear from our eyes and where “there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain.”¹ In our minds we had a picture of exactly how the world should be. However, what *should be*, and what *was* weren’t lining up. Our hope was simply misplaced. We hoped this world would be like heaven, and it’s not!

If we had truly lost forever a child we had never met, we would have been devastated beyond belief.

*If we had truly
lost forever a
child we had
never met, we
would have
been devastated
beyond belief.*

¹ Revelation 21:4

Instead of being devastated, we were greatly comforted in knowing that our precious Brea was not gone forever but was simply in heaven. In fact, we were never robbed of her, but still have an eternity to spend with her. You see, our only *true* hope is in eternity. Paul wrote in the Bible, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”² Hope in this life is futile. Because of our hope in eternal life, we have been able to go on, knowing that the things that are painfully absent from this life are the same things that make heaven all the more meaningful.

God’s desire is that you, and that every single person, would spend eternity in heaven with Him.³ Because that’s what He wants, He’s left us clear directions on how to get there. In fact, you can confidently *know* that you have eternal life.⁴ The Bible says that you can never be *good enough* to get to heaven,⁵ but that Christ died on the cross to pay for all the wrongs you’ve ever done.⁶ That’s the great thing about eternal life. It’s dependent on what God did for you, not what you can do for Him. Jesus said that, “Everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”⁷ By believing in Christ, and by trusting in what He did for you, you too can have eternal life and share in a hope that runs far deeper than any struggle you’ll ever face.

That’s the first parenting lesson. There’s nothing more important than knowing where you and your family will spend eternity. If your children grow to be successful beyond your wildest dreams, but you don’t get to spend eternity with them, you’ve missed the mark.

² 1 Corinthians 15:19

³ 1 Timothy 2:3,4

⁴ 1 John 5:13

⁵ Ephesians 2:8,9; Titus 3:5

⁶ 1 Peter 3:18; Romans 5:8

⁷ John 3:16,17

I also share this story with you so you can see that I’m a real person. Like you, I have real hurts and real dreams. My kids are part of me. When they suffer, I suffer. When they take their first steps, I’m as proud as if I took them myself.

I remember when our first son was born. Our close friends came to visit minutes after delivery. I stepped out of the hospital room to greet them and was overcome with emotion. My eyes welled up, tears streamed down my face, and my voice cracked as I choked out the words, “It’s a boy!” I loved my boy beyond description, and I still do. I love all my kids. Each one has a special place in my heart.

Like me, you have a heart for your kids. You love them like crazy and you want what is best for them. In each of them you see special characteristics, and you wonder just what kind of extraordinary lives God has planned for them. In some ways your kids might even be the embodiment of all your dreams.

Our kids can also be the embodiment of all our fears. We can almost feel that if they destroy their own lives they will simultaneously destroy our lives. A lot of dreams died the day that our little Brea died—a lot of dreams. Unfortunately, I’ve seen the parental dreams of many others shattered, not from death, but from rebelliousness. I’ve tried to comfort parents who have lost all control and most of their hope, and I’ve wondered if our loss was easier than theirs. The saddest thing is that their loss was avoidable.

That is why I’m passionate about parenting. Quite frankly, I’m brokenhearted from seeing well-meaning Christian parents grief-stricken by the choices of their children. God’s Word offers so much hope for parents, not just to avoid heartache, but to experience the joy of seeing their kids follow hard after God.

Please permit me to speak strongly at times. I desperately care about you, your kids, and the reputation of God’s character. I may fall into a fatherly tone at times. That’s my thing and

it's hard to tone it down when I feel so strongly about it!

I'd like to take the rest of the chapter to talk about the mindset of a successful parent. I've already shared some of my heart with you, and having a heart for your children is a critical element of being a good parent. It is also important to have a vision for the incredible calling that God has on your life. There are key aspects of parenting that we'll get to later like love, discipline, and training. However, how you mentally engage with parenting, its value, and its urgency, will greatly affect every element of your parenting.

The State of the Family

Imagine a 16-year-old boy who loves God and is considerate and respectful to you. He is faithful in his schoolwork, diligent at work, and involved at church. He is likeable, yet he cares more about what God thinks of him than about what his peers think. He has a deep and meaningful relationship with God, and his main goal in life is to live for Him and to spread His message. You could say he is a dream child. I believe that is a description of a man of God, and is the type of young man God would want us to raise.

I'm not concerned about *exactly* how that looks in each of my kids' lives. I understand that some will be more outgoing and some more reserved. They will all have varying degrees of success in the world. I imagine that some will even be more excited about God than others. Nevertheless, that is the basic picture in my mind of what I hope my kids grow into. That is what I will refer to as "winning" with my kids. Basically, God wants them to be like Jesus, and so do I. I don't expect them to be perfect by any means, but I do expect the influence of Christ to be undeniably obvious in their lives.

On the other hand, if my kids won't talk to me, don't have a

vision for their lives, and have no interest in God, then I would say that I have lost that child—at least for a time. In the Bible, Eli, Samuel, David, and the father of the prodigal son are all examples of parents who lost their children.

In a future chapter we'll look at why we can have hope, even confidence, that we can win with our kids. But first let's evaluate the current state of parenting. I wish I could put a positive spin on it all, but I must be honest. I'm gravely concerned with the state of Christian families. I see that more are losing than winning, and I'm terrified that most parents aren't even aware of how dangerously far we've drifted from God's ideal. Consider the following letter:

Dear Friends in Christ,

I am not a member of your church, I belong to Peak Lutheran⁸ in Estes Park, and I am appealing to churches in the state as a heart-sick mother. I have two grown children. My daughter is an alcoholic and my son is a drug addict. I have done everything in my power to help them both. The only thing I can do is turn it over to God and pray. I feel that the more people that are praying for them the better. I feel like I am doing something constructive and it helps me feel better. My request is to ask for people to pray for them for three months. The prayer is this, "Dear God please surround Ben and Lisa with Your love, fill them with Your Holy Spirit. Keep them safe and sober."

Please do whatever you can with this request. God Bless your church, your staff and all who worship and praise in your holy house.

⁸ Names and places have been changed.