



*Problems
in
Parenting*



Problems Christians Face

Problems in Parenting

**Learning from Parents
in the Bible**

by

Jonathan Hughes

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Problems with Parenting

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New King James Version

Chapter 1

Introduction

Phew! How on earth did that happen? And where have the years gone? Our children have grown up and the nest is now empty. Sometimes it seems like it was only yesterday that our oldest child was born. I remember the experience well, though not the time of day or other trivial incidentals like that. I leave that kind of stuff to my wife Dawn who reminds me if I need to know. But I do remember the profound sense I had, as I went to church a few hours later, of what it must have been like for God to send His Son into this world. I am still not convinced that Dawn thought it was right for me to leave her and go to church. However, the midwives appeared keen to get rid of me, and she needed her sleep, so it did not seem all that unreasonable at the time, just the first of my many mistakes!

Second time round was completely different. Our daughter was in a hurry, and as I desperately pressed the emergency buzzer, I wished I had brought my wicket keeper's gloves to catch her as she shot out. Fortunately for all concerned, the midwives arrived in time, but telling Dawn not to push while they gloved up was never likely to achieve much!

By the time number three was born, we felt like 'old-timers', and smiled knowingly at the first time mums on the ward. This is easy we thought, and so it was, until several months later he got one infection after another. I almost forgot the meaning of the words 'bed' and 'quiet'.

Of course, all the comics paint a rosy picture of parenthood – what an enriching experience it is and so fulfilling. Well, that may be true once the grandchildren arrive. Before then if I had to sum it up in one word, I think it would be ‘hard-work’ (OK that was two, but I hyphenated it, so I reckon I can get away with it.). Of course there are also numerous

***There are no guarantees
in parenting.***

joys involved in parenting. Every child is different; so different in fact that, as I write this book, it is not with the aim of giving lots of advice on how to be a good parent. There are no guarantees in parenting.

If I put £100 into the bank at a rate of 1% interest for a year, I know that after a year, I will have a grand total of £101. Parenting is not like that. We are responsible to God for how we parent, but great parenting does not automatically produce wonderful adult sons and daughters. Our children will ultimately be held accountable to God for their own choices. All we can do is seek to put God at the very heart of our family life and make the best decisions we can.

It is as someone who has made more than my fair share of mistakes, that I start to write this book. I remember, at one stage, when I felt like things were hopeless and one of the children was going seriously ‘off the rails’, I decided I would try and find some good examples of parents in the Bible to see what I could learn from them. Then all I would need to do was to copy them and all would be well. I looked long and hard, and in a strange way was not a little comforted when I struggled to come up with any positive examples of biblical parents who got it all right.

***...I struggled to
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who got it all
right.***

Instead there were many examples of parents who got it wrong, some with disastrous consequences. There were other examples

where God overruled, and the children grew up to become real men and women of God in spite of their parents' terrible example. There is a lesson for us in that. You see God is a wonderful and gracious God. He does not look for perfection in us. He knows better than that. He is more than able to overrule our failures in parenting. However God does look for availability from us.

God is a wonderful and gracious God. He does not look for perfection in us.

When God gives us children they are His children, on loan to us for a few years. They do not belong to us, so we cannot bring them up as we choose. God is the One who is able to make them the kind of people they ought to be. But even God does not force an individual to be someone they choose not to be. I am certainly no super-dad, but our children did have an excellent mum and ultimately, I am deeply thankful to the Lord for the way in which He has taken our three children and moulded them into the adults they have become.

In this book we will look at six couples in the Bible to whom God gave the job of raising children. We will look at some key features in their marriage relationship and see how this impacted the way that they brought up their children. Parenting is not a job that is undertaken in isolation to everything else. The relationship between the parents needs to be right before children are added to the family. Sadly, many parents face bringing up children on their own. The extended family or a network of friends may well take the place of the absent parent. The principles of parenting remain the same. We will also look at some of the defining moments in these couples' experiences as parents and learn some of the lessons that will be applicable to most parents today.

The principles of parenting remain the same.

The problems in society today bear tragic testimony to the difficulties that abound in parenting. Poor attainment at school, a lack of respect for authority, youth crime and family breakdown all highlight these difficulties.

First and foremost a parent's relationship with God needs to be right.

I firmly believe that what makes it even harder is when the family is built on shaky foundations to start with. What do I mean by this? First and foremost a parent's relationship with God needs to be right. My most spectacular failures always seemed to coincide with the times when my own relationship with my heavenly Father was not right. A lack of prayer and Bible study, unconfessed sin and wrong attitudes towards others are sure signs of a wrong relationship with God. This inevitably leads to a wrong relationship with our children.

Secondly, a parent's relationship with their spouse needs to be right. If my children see that I do not respect my wife, then I should not be surprised if they do not respect her either. Thirdly, a parent needs to be content with their own life. We cannot live our lives through our children – they are their own person. All our unfulfilled aspirations and desires need to be given up rather than heaped upon our children. Trying to make them what we wanted for ourselves, or give them the things we never had is a bad idea. God gave you the character and the gifts that He wanted you to have, and you can be content with who God has made you. You need not worry that God made His first mistake when He made you. Once we learn to be content with who we are, then we can teach our children to be content with who God has made them to be, rather than trying to force them into a mould of our making.

Finally, do not give up! Parenting is hard work. In fact it is the greatest work you are likely to do in life. In the 'Fellowship of the Ring',

Parenting is ... the greatest work you are likely to do in life.

J.R.R. Tolkein tells the story of a hobbit called Frodo who wished that a powerful ring had never come to him – the burden was too great. Gandalf, a wise wizard, had to reassure him that this was common to all the ring bearers. All Frodo had to do was decide what he would do with the ring! There may be times when you wonder why you ever had children. But what we need to do is decide what we are going to do with our children. If we decide that we are going to bring them up for God, to the best of our ability, then we can be assured that we will never lack His strength and support. We can pray that, like John, a day will come when we can say, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.” (3 John 4).

If we decide that we are going to bring them up for God, to the best of our ability, then ... we will never lack His strength and support.

Chapter 2

Abraham and Sarah

Genesis chapters 12 – 22.

The first couple we shall consider as we look for help in the Bible with the task of parenting is Abraham and Sarah. We begin their story as they are living in Haran (situated in modern day Turkey). God appeared to Abraham (whose name was originally Abram) and called him to complete the journey he had begun in Ur and to settle in a land that God would reveal to him once he got there. Abraham travelled through this ‘promised land’ of Canaan and when there was a famine, he journeyed south into Egypt.

While he was there, the beauty of his wife Sarah came to the attention of Pharaoh. In a moral lapse, aimed only at self-preservation, Abraham told Sarah to say that she was his sister – a misleading half-truth (20:12). Sarah was taken into the harem of Pharaoh, but because of the judgement of God, it was not long before Pharaoh realised that Sarah was in fact Abraham’s wife. Together, they left Egypt and returned to live in Canaan. Abraham was then used by God to rescue his nephew, Lot, who had got into bad company (ch.14). God made many promises to Abraham that his descendants would be very numerous (12:1–3; 15:5; 17:6; 22:17) - as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore. But Abraham was almost 100 years old and Sarah only a little younger and the promise of God seemed impossible. As was the practice then, Sarah suggested that Abraham use her handmaid, Hagar, to produce an heir and in time Ishmael was born. But the promises God had

given to Abraham, a land to live securely in and a son, were not to be fulfilled through Ishmael. So God reaffirmed His promise and, beyond human hope, Sarah conceived and Isaac was born (ch.22).

The result was predictable; there was conflict and disharmony within the home and Sarah felt that the special place which Isaac her son should have had was under threat. So she issued Abraham with an ultimatum to banish Hagar and Ishmael. This Abraham reluctantly did but, in the goodness of God, he was comforted in the knowledge that God would provide for Ishmael and his descendants. The dramatic climax to the story came when God called Abraham to take his only remaining son and offer him as a sacrifice to God. It was a test of faith where the stakes could not be higher. As the knife was about to fall, God stopped Abraham and provided a substitute for Isaac. Abraham and Sarah's journey from doubt to faith was complete. Unsurprisingly, more is written about them in Hebrews chapter 11 than about any other individuals in the history of Israel as examples of a real and living faith.

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and disharmony
within the home ...*

From their story there are many lessons which we can learn that will encourage us in parenting. Perhaps a little surprisingly, the first two lessons have nothing to do with children whatsoever!

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support.*

Firstly, Abraham, and Sarah in particular, give us a tremendous example of marital support. In Genesis chapter 12 we find Abraham telling his wife that they were going to leave behind all that was secure and familiar, friends and family, and go to a new land. That was a pretty big 'ask' for Sarah, and perhaps not unreasonably I picture her asking Abraham where exactly they were going to go. Then the real challenge to her faith came as he replied that he did not know

but God would make it all plain sometime. You have to admire Abraham's courage – I am not sure that I would have dared start that kind of conversation with my wife. There are times when God guides us to serve Him and He may not make that quite so plain to both partners. At just such times, an excellent marriage will allow for just such a conversation.

Sarah does not laugh or nag or belittle Abraham. In fact, she obeys and goes with him. She had a faith equal to that of Abraham. Sometimes within marriage there are times when it is appropriate for one partner to be more cautious and to plan carefully. But this must always be done with a view to actively supporting the other. There are few things more tiring in a marriage than when both partners are pulling in opposite directions. Real communication - listening and talking, free from the fear of accusation - is vital. Spiritually supporting the other partner's dreams is so important

Real communication - listening and talking, free from the fear of accusation - is vital.

as we realise that the person we love will one day stand before the judgement seat of Christ and give an account of his or her life. I do not think the excuse, "She wouldn't let me", will hold weight with God. As a spouse, I want my wife to be full of good works to cast before the Lord on that day, and that means being ready to support her, sometimes even when I want to say "no". Sarah respected her husband's spiritual calling and position within the family and acted accordingly. Husbands and wives need to actively support one another so that they are both rich towards God. In fact, I think Sarah's faith must have been greater as we see in the next lesson.

By the end of chapter 12 we find Abraham settled near Egypt. He appreciated that his wife was very beautiful and so told her to tell others that she was his sister rather than his wife. (Just so that we are clear about Abraham's actions, the scenario is played

out almost exactly again in chapter 20 – different location, same old Abraham using his wife as a human shield!) Abraham was worried that Pharaoh might want Sarah for himself and kill him so that he could have her. In an act of immense bravery, Sarah went along with Abraham’s plan.

We can only say that in this incident Abraham’s faith was not what it should have been. Is it reasonable to suggest that God would call Abraham to leave home, having promised him a new home, only for him to end up dead at the hands of Pharaoh? The idea is nonsense, and yet that is what Abraham was thinking! But the way that Sarah responded is hugely instructive. What she did not do was say to Abraham, “Well it was all your idea to leave Haran; I was quite happy there!”, or words to that effect. Instead, while Abraham is at a spiritually low point, Sarah continues to support her husband recognising the vision that he had received from the Lord.

Inevitably, within a marriage, there will be times when one partner is on a spiritual high and times when he or she is on a spiritual low. We need to be ready to carry the other person then, particularly when there are children within the family, so that there is a constant and continuous good spiritual atmosphere within the home. Children need to have the example of both parents always committed to serving the Lord, even when it is one spouse carrying the other.

*Children need to
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example of both
parents ...*

Next, in chapters 15 and 17, we see God giving Abraham and Sarah the promise of a child and descendants as numerous as the stars. It is an often overlooked principle that children are a gift from God. We are so familiar with where babies come from and birth control, that sometimes we forget the fact that it is

God who gives life for we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). Understanding this profoundly influences the way we may view our children. We live in a day when we speak of ‘designer babies’ and ‘trophy children’ as if our children were little more than something to make us look good. When we understand that children are created by God, who has made them exactly the way they are for His purpose, then we will want to raise them differently.

My children are not mine - they belong to God and He has entrusted them to me for as long as He wants. Buying presents can be a nightmare! My marriage is a history of goofy presents bought because I thought Dawn wanted or needed them. However, God never gives an unsuitable gift. All His gifts are exactly right.

God never gives an unsuitable gift.

Our firstborn never needed much sleep – he was just too full of life, and still is! Many an early morning I found myself wishing he would sleep more and wondering why God had not given me a child who slept 7 ‘til 7! But God knew I was lazy and self-centred and needed those rough edges knocking off and the way He chose to make a start on that lesson could not have come in a nicer package. All I had to do was recognise that my exhaustion was allowed by God and keep going! God does not give us children without also giving the strength we need to raise them for Him. And that must be the over-riding aim of parenting – to raise a child who is ready to serve the Lord in a rational and reasonable way. Everything else is secondary to that!

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For Abraham and Sarah it was all taking so long and God’s promises hardly seemed credible. So Sarah took things into her

own hands and suggested that Abraham father a child with her servant girl Hagar. Then the promise would be fulfilled. Or so she thought! We read about this in chapter 16. Taking things into our own hands and making things happen according to our ideas is never a good thing. The story of Ishmael, the result of this sinful union, bears sorry testimony to this. History shows a sad succession of battles between the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Isaac even to the present day.

As we seek to parent our children we need to do so by daily asking for God's guidance. There are frankly too many voices – books, websites and forums, relatives – all too eager to offer advice about anything and everything and in my experience most of it is not that helpful. What worked for me is not necessarily going to work for you. One of the best pieces of advice I was given was “find what works for you and go with it”. Generally speaking, aim to get the basics right – pray and read your Bible daily, meet with God's people, love others unconditionally, learn to serve, learn that in Christ, despite your mistakes, God sees you as righteous etc.. These principles will keep you as you seek to bring up your children. Recognise God's promise that “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). As I look at my record as a dad, this verse could not be more true.

*... make pleasing
God ... the focus
of your parenting!*

So make pleasing God rather than your mother-in-law or the school mums the focus of your parenting!

Then in chapter 21, Isaac, the child of promise, is finally born. God always keeps His promises and this is a pattern that we ought to emulate in our family life. Be very slow to make a promise and then be sure that you keep it. If I am known as someone who is truthful and reliable then when I tell the children about Jesus they will listen. If I leave a string of broken promises behind me

then they may, not unreasonably, think that what I tell them is not wholly believable. This not only goes for the big things in life, but also the small, everyday things. Do not say ‘no’ if you are not going to enforce it. It is far better to choose what is really important, to pick your battles, and then to ensure that you win

A few very clear and consistent rules are far better than trying to micromanage everything in a child’s life.

them. So for example, it really mattered to me that even from a young age we all went to church together. That was non-negotiable. But there were plenty of things that one or another member of the family did which, whilst I did not particularly like or agree with, were not worth fighting about. A few very clear and consistent rules are far better than trying to micromanage everything in a child’s life. They are each individuals who have to learn to make choices and live with the consequences.

Finally, in chapter 22 we come to one of the most dramatic stories in the whole Bible. Abraham is told to take Isaac, the child of promise, and sacrifice him to God in a predetermined location that God would reveal to Abraham. God had made a similar call over 25 years earlier to Abraham, as he was called to leave home and family, and move to a new land but then it had been his livelihood that was on the line. Now it was his **life**, his **future**. Would a lifetime of experience with God be sufficient for Abraham’s faith to endure this test? And what would he tell Sarah? Many a time this incident has been used as a picture of God taking His Son, the Lord Jesus, to the cross and in fact, geographically Mt. Moriah and Calvary were very close to each other.

I think there are two valuable lessons within this story to help us as parents. Firstly, the best way of

... the best way of teaching our children obedience is by demonstration rather than communication.

teaching our children obedience is by demonstration rather than communication. It is very telling that Abraham does not delay in carrying out the instruction that God had given him. “Early the next morning” indicates to me the readiness of Abraham to obey God no matter what the cost. When our children see this kind of living faith and obedience in us, then it is far more likely that they will follow our example; certainly far more likely than if we just tell them over and over that they should do as they are told!

Children very quickly imitate their parents in so many ways. It came like jumping into an ice bath the day one of my children did something that shocked me, only for me to realise that they had learnt it from me! Simple obedience to God in every aspect of our lives is the very best example that we can set our children. I

Simple obedience to God in every aspect of our lives is the very best example that we can set our children.

say ‘simple’ but it is usually costly. However, I have learnt that we can never give God too much. We need to be prepared to listen to His voice as He speaks to us through His word and through the work of the Holy Spirit

acting upon our mind and conscience and, when He calls, to obey. This will stand your children in good stead.

Secondly, we see that Abraham and Isaac go together, leaving the other young men behind. Time spent with

your children is so valuable it is difficult to think too highly of it. We speak about ‘quality time’ today and this is important, but it is not something to schedule into our diaries as just another appointment. Children will tend to open up to a parent when

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they know they have that parent’s undivided attention, rather than at the appointment time. I tend to think that quantity time leads to quality time, and if a child does not feel that they are important enough to have their parent’s attention, then they will

look elsewhere for guidance. Career and church service are important but the time involved should be carefully balanced with the needs of a child, particularly in the early years. As a child gets older then they may be able to be included in other aspects of life also.

I remember, with many happy memories, time spent playing cricket or painting models with my sons. Naturally speaking, I enjoy both cricket and model making so it was not a hardship, but the best part of those two activities was always the conversations that would go with them – chatting about life and spiritual issues they had questions about. It strikes me, though, that those sorts of conversations hardly ever arose when I had just got in from work and was making my sandwiches for the next day, or cleaning the shoes and seeing how long tea would

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be or checking the emails. For sure, all those things had to be done but they prevented real communication from taking place. Though it does not seem so at the time, we have so few years to spend with our children when they are young, that it is worth prioritising time spent on them.

Remember that raising your children and providing for them is every bit as much a spiritual act of service as leading an evangelistic campaign or teaching a youth group.

So as we conclude our chapter on Abraham and Sarah, it is worth reviewing what we have seen in their lives. The best way in which we can parent our children is by having a strong marriage, where both partners are busy serving the Lord together and supporting one another. Openness and honesty foster a healthy environment in which children can grow up. Children are a gift from God and should be viewed as such. They are first and foremost His children but this means that He will also give the necessary strength and wisdom to raise them, if

we keep our relationship right with Him.

It is vital that we are known to keep our word so our children understand that, if we say something, it will happen. A few well chosen rules, always enforced, are better than an unending list of random instructions. Finally, children

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learn best by example – and what better example can we give them than our obedience to God. What they see in me is far more important than what I say and, by making time for them, they have the opportunity to talk about and develop their own characters in a constructive manner.

EXAM 1 - Abraham and Sarah

USE EXAM FORM B

Enter the correct answer:

1. Which of the following did God NOT use as a picture of how numerous Abraham's offspring would be?
 - a. Sand
 - b. Rain
 - c. Stars
2. Real communication involves
 - a. agreeing and acting
 - b. listening and talking
 - c. talking and deciding
3. 'Fearfully and wonderfully made' describes the life that God gives to each individual in:
 - a. Psalm 45:2
 - b. Psalm 139:14
 - c. Psalm 119:6
4. What two characteristics of God are mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12:9?
 - a. Mercy and peace
 - b. Strength and grace
 - c. Hope and love
5. Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac on which mountain?
 - a. Carmel
 - b. Sinai
 - c. Moriah

Enter TRUE or FALSE:

6. Abraham was over 120 years old when God gave him the promise of children.
7. Abraham was aware of the land that God had promised him when he first left Ur.
8. The time when Abraham claimed that Sarah was his sister was a one-off lapse in judgement.
9. Isaac and Ishmael were rivals for their father's blessing.
10. The best way to teach a child obedience is by demonstration.

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

What is likely to make a strong marriage?

Chapter 3

Isaac and Rebekah

Genesis chapters 24 – 27

We read in the previous chapter of the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. Now he had grown to manhood and Abraham was concerned that he should not marry a heathen woman but one from among his own people. So he sent his trusted servant back to his family in Nahor, Mesopotamia, to find a wife for his son. The servant spoke of his master and of Isaac to Rebekah and her family and she was persuaded to return with him, leaving them behind, to marry Isaac. We pick up the story at the end of chapter 24.

The first thing we note is that when they first met, Isaac had gone out into the field to meditate. Isaac was doing the right thing when something unexpected and wonderful happened – his future wife arrived! Wonderful and unexpected things tend to happen when we are doing the right thing! Sometimes we may be so desperate to get married that it becomes an all consuming passion. On one level this is understandable because God intended from the very beginning that a man and a woman should live together in marriage. However, the way we go about getting married matters. Isaac shows us the way. He put God first and, in God's time, God gave him a wife.

Wonderful and unexpected things tend to happen when we are doing the right thing!

In Proverbs 3:5,6, Solomon wrote, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your

ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct your paths.” In Matthew 6:33 Jesus Himself said, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” Whenever we place our lives, problems and all, into God’s hands and carry on following Him then He will work every circumstance out for our good. It may not be what we expect, and it will often happen in unexpected ways, but we can be sure that we will not lose out by serving Him and putting Christ first in our lives. That is not to say that our lives will be problem free and, in fact, that is exactly what we see with Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac was forty years old by this time in his story (25:20), and there was a major problem in that Rebekah had not been able to have children. The devastating problem of childlessness is beyond the scope of this chapter, but perhaps the principal response to it is to be found here – we need to learn to trust.

– we need to learn to trust.

There are so many other situations within marriage where one partner is unable to give the other, and maybe themselves, what they wanted. Here we see the right response to just such circumstances. Isaac could have blamed Rebekah, or vice versa. We could imagine Rebekah shutting Isaac out. After all how could he possibly understand what she was going through? Blame often leads to recrimination, leading to bitterness, and then to breakdown! Instead, Isaac prayed for his wife (25:21). Where he was unable to solve his wife’s problem, he knew a God who could. Instead of looking for answers away from home, with another woman, he brings his wife before God. He had seen the problems that had been caused for his own parents and refused to copy their mistakes. The greatest thing that we can do for our spouse and for our children is consistently pray for them.

The greatest thing that we can do ... for our children is consistently pray for them.

It is remarkable that the spiritual tone which Isaac set for his home was fully matched by Rebekah, who prayed about her unborn children in the very next verse after Isaac had prayed for her. Husbands, it is from you that God will require an accounting for your family. Let each one of us take seriously our responsibility in setting the spiritual quality of the home.

Husbands, it is from you that God will require an accounting for your family.

Next we see that God tells Rebekah she is expecting twins and in due course they are born – Esau first and then Jacob. It is hard to imagine two brothers who were more unlike each other. Esau was an outdoors type, a good hunter and a “man of the field”. Jacob on the other hand was more of a ‘mummy’s boy’, quite content to stay at home, and able to cook for himself. I think it worth making the point that all children are not the same. Even within a family, children can be very different. And yet so often we compare them with one another and this can place an intolerable burden on child and parent alike.

... all children are not the same.

Just because I like football or science or a hundred and one other things does not mean that my children have to like the same. Just because I enjoyed my particular career does not mean that my children should follow a similar pathway. Untold misery can be caused when we try to shoehorn our children into the way that we think best, but for which they show no inclination whatsoever. By all means offer advice and ask questions to help them consider and make choices on an informed basis. For example, it is no use little Peter wanting to be a doctor and then choosing to study art and literature at school. Some things require specific choices and we should be ready to help our children at every stage in understanding the implications of their choices. But that is not the same as applying strong verbal or emotional pressure to make a

particular choice that we think best for them.

We should not make comparisons between the abilities of our child and that of other children. One child sleeps well, another does not. One child talks by the time they are one, another does not. It is no help whatsoever going down the road: “Why is my child so inferior in whatever way to so and so?” God made them just the way they are. He is quite capable of making them someone else but He chose their character and strengths and weaknesses. These are what make them the person they are! First, it is essential for me to learn to be content with the way I am, and then to be such for our children. It is entirely right and proper that we should have a spiritual concern for our children. We cannot save them or make them a Christian, but we should always seek to live out the Gospel before them and to teach them the truths of the Bible at every opportunity. After all, this is what we should be doing for any individual. We do need to allow our children to make their own choices and accept the consequences but also to discipline them. This is a vital part of parenting, and it is one that we shall pick up in chapter 6.

*God
made
them
just
the
way
they
are.*

There is a serious problem in verse 28 of chapter 25. “Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” Favouritism within families is a sure recipe for conflict and hurt and so it proved for this family. The sad thing is that the favouritism was based solely on personal preferences. One could almost understand it if Isaac had loved Esau more because he was morally upright and a leading light in the community whereas Jacob was a rebellious waster. But the basis of the preference lay in what Isaac liked to eat, or the fact that Jacob was around more. No wonder these two boys grew up as

Favouritism within families is a sure recipe for conflict and hurt ...

competitors rather than as brothers.

Within the family dynamic, it is important for a child to know that he or she is loved unconditionally. This is the way that God loves me. He loves me just the way I am, but He loves me too much to keep me that way. He does not love me because I can sing or because I am good or any other trait. He loves me because He is love. This is the kind of love we must show our children and each one in equal measure. Time and resources must, so far as is possible, be divided equally between our children. Of course, there are situations when one or another may need more, but this should be balanced out over time, so that all know they are of equal value in the family.

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It is also important that whilst our children understand that they are loved and valued, they are not the centre of the family. When your children leave home you will still be married to your spouse! That is the key relationship which you constantly need to invest in. Romantic gestures, time alone together, time to talk and understand your spouse's feelings must not be forgotten in the mad rush that can be family life. I hope my children always knew that I loved them very much, but I loved their mother first! Wives, I know your children are so important to you, but your husband requires your attention also. He needs your guidance, your wisdom and your affection, and it is all too easy for him to feel forgotten as one child after another clamours for your attention.

... our children ... are not the centre of the family.

What may have seemed like a harmless gap in chapter 25 had become a wide chasm in chapter 27. Isaac is old and ready to give the family blessing. Normally this would go to the older child, and Isaac was more than happy for this to be so. Rebekah

had other ideas and so she hatched a plan to trick her husband into giving Jacob the blessing. She cooked Isaac's favourite dish and got Jacob to dress up as his brother, and then Jacob impersonated his brother and secured his father's blessing. When Esau returned home and realised that he had been conned out of the blessing, he was so enraged he became murderous. Jacob had to flee for his life, leaving the family home and would never see his mother again. What a tragic end to a story of family breakdown!

Who was right in the question of the blessing? Isaac had tradition on his side – the blessing belonged to the eldest. Rebekah was right in that God had promised her that it would be the younger son who would be the stronger. They were both right... and both wrong! You see, to ask who was right displays completely the wrong attitude. They both thought they knew best and pursued their own wishes with no regard to the other. What was missing from this family was effective communication. Isaac and Rebekah appear to have stopped talking to each other and were just talking to their favoured child. There was a total lack of a co-ordinated approach to their problem. What an example for us to avoid!

What was missing from this family was effective communication.

An open and honest atmosphere is a vital aspect to a relationship,

There were just too many secrets in the family relationships and secrets are usually a real killer within marriage and within a happy family life. An open and honest atmosphere is a vital aspect to a relationship, and in time it should be the atmosphere that children are brought into. Shared post, shared finances, shared conversations with others and how we have spent our day are the best foundations for family life. I am not saying that the children when they are five need to know how much I earn,

or that I gossip about things told to me in confidence, but secrets create barriers within the family. If my children see that I do not trust my wife enough to tell her everything, then why should they? If my children see that Dawn could tell me she had spent too much on the food shop, or bought something that we did not really need without my exploding and getting angry, then they will learn that they also can tell me things I might not agree with. Sometimes there will be things to talk about that children need not know about, but keep those conversations until such time when they are not about, and not aware that they are missing out.

Effective communication is essential in our parenting, primarily between a husband and wife, but also with our children. To communicate well requires us to talk regularly – it is no good bottling things up and saying nothing at the risk of exposing a disagreement. To communicate well requires us to listen – just because I disagree with my spouse does not mean she is wrong! To communicate well requires us to understand – why is my spouse saying what she is saying? What emotional content is there, or previous experience that is leading to this point of view? To communicate well requires a co-ordinated approach that both parties can tolerate. Sometimes, compromises must be reached that we are not entirely happy with, but still we publicly support them wholeheartedly.

To communicate well requires us to listen –

It is a disaster if our children learn that when they do not get the answer they want from mum then they can always go to dad and get the answer they do want! Parents must learn to speak with one voice, and children need to learn that this is so from the earliest years. If one of our children had been naughty during the day while I was out at work, then it totally undermines my wife if I come home and immediately act as if everything is fine. Her

discipline needs to be enforced and apologies made before the family can move on. It may be that the best thing in a situation is for me to create a bit of space between the offending parties to allow tempers to cool. But in doing so I need to take care that I do not give the impression that ‘mum’s the bad cop, I’m the good cop’. We speak and act as one... and sort out any differences in private much later. Spouses need to build each other up. A careless word or a ‘knowing look’ can soon give children the understanding that parents do not respect each other and, if that is the case, then there is no cause for children to respect their parents either.

Because Isaac and Rebekah had stopped working together the whole family fell apart. Had they communicated more effectively, perhaps a compromise could have been reached. Maybe Jacob and Esau could have continued to live under the same roof and both could have been there when their mother died. I am pretty sure that neither Isaac nor Rebekah felt they had won the argument. They were both losers here! And that is always the way with marital strife.

Finally, we come to an interesting episode in chapter 26. Isaac and Rebekah move to Gerar, deep in Philistine territory, to escape a famine. Isaac persuades Rebekah to pretend she is his sister in case king Abimelech desired Rebekah for himself and wanted to murder Isaac. Does this sound familiar? It should do! This was exactly what Isaac’s father Abraham had done – twice! The apple never falls far from the tree! But it does reinforce to us the message that children learn so much from the example we set them. There is both an encouragement and a warning to us in this.

... children learn so much from the example we set them.

In our work with children at our church youth group we have heard really young children use language that was entirely age

inappropriate, and yet when we met the parents it was not difficult to guess from whom they had learnt it. I also remember being at a friend's wedding and, out of the corner of my eye caught sight of the back of my daughter. Just for an instant I thought it was Dawn because my daughter was the same age as when Dawn and I first met. Almost physically, it made my heart jump. Very often children will

... act in a way that Jesus would have done, and encourage our children to copy that example.

copy what they see and hear in the home. The way they dress and behave may well reflect what they see in their parents. It is so important that they get a good example and one that is worth following. Paul could write in 1 Corinthians chapter 11:1 (NIV) "Follow my example, as I follow the

example of Christ." Here we have the perfect example of parental guidance: act in a way that Jesus would have done, and encourage our children to copy that example. See how easy this parenting business is!

We have learnt from Isaac and Rebekah's example that they started so well, praying for one another and for the children God would give them. Isaac and Rebekah's children were very different, as are all children, and siblings should not be judged against each other. Sadly, those differences led to favouritism within the family and family breakdown, as a lack of communication drove a wedge between the family members. The importance of effective interaction – talking, listening and empathising, in an open and honest atmosphere cannot be overstated. Open communication that will avoid unnecessary secrets is to be encouraged. We have also again learnt that parents are an example to their children by what they do far more than by what they say.

EXAM 2 - Isaac and Rebekah

USE EXAM FORM B

Enter the correct answer:

1. God directing our paths, according to Proverbs 3:5-6, occurs when we
 - a. know our Bibles
 - b. go to church
 - c. trust in the Lord
2. The first thing Isaac did when Rebekah remained childless was to
 - a. blame her and look elsewhere
 - b. talk to her and try to understand her feelings
 - c. pray about the issue
3. The reason Isaac loved Esau was because
 - a. Esau physically resembled his father
 - b. he had a taste for wild game
 - c. Esau was his firstborn son
4. Who won the argument over which son should receive the family blessing?
 - a. Isaac
 - b. Rebekah
 - c. Neither - they were both losers
5. Isaac repeated the mistake his father Abraham had made, in
 - a. Gerar
 - b. Nahor
 - c. Egypt

Enter TRUE or FALSE:

6. Husbands are responsible to God for their families.
7. It is of the first importance to be content with who God has made us before we can help parent our children.
8. One consequence of Jacob stealing his brother's blessing was that he never saw his mother again.
9. Paul encouraged the Christians in Corinth to follow his example because he was an apostle.
10. Empathy is a vital part of effective interaction.

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

In what ways can favouritism within families be expressed?

Chapter 4

Naomi and Elimelech

Ruth chapter 1

We read about this couple in the book of Ruth and we will focus particularly on chapter 1. About 1100 BC during the times of the Judges there was a famine in Israel and we first meet this family as they leave Bethlehem to go to Moab. It is worth noting that the name 'Bethlehem' means 'house of bread' and yet there was little bread to be had at that time. From this we can assume that the spiritual state of the nation of Israel was not particularly high and that God had sent some measure of famine as a warning to Israel to repent and turn again to Him. Sadly, Elimelech travelled to Moab with his family to make a home there, an ill-judged decision for a godly Jew. From Deuteronomy 23:3, we read that the Moabites, who were descendants of Lot, had no place in the assembly of the LORD. They were an idolatrous people who had no regard for God or His people. Why Elimelech chose to take his family **there** we cannot know, but we can be sure that he was in the wrong place.

*... an
ill-judged
decision
for a godly
Jew.*

We read that in the course of time, he died, and so Naomi was left with her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. They married local girls, Orpah and Ruth and continued to live in Moab for ten years. When both boys both died, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem having heard that the famine was over. As she set out, Orpah and Ruth wanted to go with her and they all packed up their things and set off for Judah. However, Naomi told them to return to their own families since she had nothing to offer

them. Orpah did go back to Moab but Ruth, with spiritual insight that I think she can have learnt only from Naomi, boldly declared in verses 16 - 17: “Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me.”

On her return, Naomi told those who remembered her to call her Mara, which means bitter. She thought that she now had nothing left, having left Bethlehem with so much. However, through the faith and hard work of her daughter-in-law she was provided for. Not only that, but Ruth married Boaz, one of Elimelech’s relatives and right at the end of the book we find that her great grandson was David, the greatest of Israel’s kings – and through him Jesus the King of kings was born!

From this little family we see how easily and quickly things can go wrong. As her boys were growing up, Naomi must have been quietly content – all seemed to be going so well, apart from the inevitable ups-and-downs of family life. But, over the space of just a few years, everything was turned upside down, and she was left feeling very bitter. Life can do this to the very best of people. In another course in this series, the Poisoned Soul, we specifically look at the issue of bitterness.

However, there are two very important spiritual applications that we can take from this family. Firstly, there is the matter of spiritual priorities within the family and how they relate to our church life. Secondly, there is the matter of how we judge things so that we get a proper perspective upon life.

It is fairly easy to imagine how and why Elimelech came to the decision to leave Bethlehem – the immediacy of the famine

... how easily and quickly things can go wrong.

situation made him think that this was his only option. Quite rightly, he wanted to provide for his family, and there did not appear to be much bread in the ‘house of bread’. The proper provision for one’s family is not a light responsibility, as Paul makes quite clear in 1 Timothy 5:8, “If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” However, where Elimelech failed is the way in which he tried to fulfil his responsibility.

... where Elimelech failed is the way in which he tried to fulfil his responsibility.

The whole basis upon which life in Israel was built was that each tribe and family were given land from God. That land was to stay within the family and was to be worked like a tenant farmer, where God was the landowner. I am quite sure that God would have provided for this family had they remained in Bethlehem, depending upon Him each day. Even if that had proved impossible, then the law provided for a kind of time limited ‘slavery’ that would have allowed Elimelech to bring up his family within Israel. That is not to say that the Israelites were in any way living as God had instructed. Elimelech and Naomi quite possibly lived during the spiritually low times described in the last five chapters of the book of Judges. No wonder there was famine in the land! However, Israel was still the nation whom God had chosen, and through whom God was working to reveal Himself to the nations. Elimelech’s actions in going to Moab were basically saying that ‘my God is not able to look after me!’

What a dreadful testimony that is to this world! But before we sit in judgement on Elimelech, let us carefully look at our own actions and decide what they are saying. The saying ‘actions speak louder than words’ is often true, and never more so than within the family. From the very outset of family

... it is vital that we make God our number one priority –

life, it is vital that we make God our number one priority – not a big house, or fulfilling career, or busy social calendar but pleasing the Lord Jesus in all that we do. Unless we are agreed on that, then every other decision we make is likely to be a bad one. If a couple disagree on the fundamental issue there is likely to be conflict within the marriage. It is essential that both partners are fully committed to giving Christ everything.

However, even when you have agreed that serving the Lord is what you both want, how that is lived out will still have its problems. There are two specific areas that I really struggled with, and to some extent still do. Firstly, there was the matter of teaching the children about money and its value. Naturally speaking, we want our children to have nice things. There is a stage in life when the brand of trainers or what you are able to tell classroom friends you got for birthdays and Christmas really matters. When finance allowed, it made me feel good to be able to spend a bit more on the children. But we need to avoid teaching them by our actions that you can buy happiness, or that

Trying to get that balance is a constant struggle with dangers in both giving too much or too little,

all that matters is having stuff. On the other hand, our children should not have to suffer for our convictions – they need to develop their own – and buying a football top that is several seasons out of date is likely to lead to some pretty ugly comments! Trying to get that balance is a constant struggle with dangers in both giving too much or too little, and this needs to be a matter of constant prayer.

Secondly, there is the matter of a spiritual home for the family, the church which we are a part of. We live in a day when there are many kinds of churches of many different persuasions. Churches are not like supermarkets, and you do not attend the one which suits you best at the time. It is no use moaning about the situation, complaining about the external divisions that so

dishonour the name of Christ. God has placed us in the day and times in which we live and expects us to be faithful to Him. No doubt Elimelech might have preferred to live during the time of Joshua or Gideon, but God had put him in Bethlehem and in a time of famine. Was God making a mistake with His timing and geography? No! God never makes mistakes and He is not going to break that record starting with me!

The real tragedy in Elimelech's life was that by running away to Moab he did not learn the wonderful lessons which God had to teach him. Just imagine for a moment if he had decided to stay in Bethlehem despite the famine, and to fully rely upon the keeping power of God. He and his family would have been kept and would have learnt that God honours those who honour Him. Instead he ran away from his problems and learnt to his ultimate cost that our problems follow us wherever we go, because we still need to learn the same lesson.

*... God honours
those who honour
Him.*

Sometimes, family life and church life can place a real pressure on family members. We can react to this in one of two ways: we can give up being committed to Him, and look for an easy life. Or we can stand fast in our commitment to Him and let God prove His incredible grace and power as He enables us to persevere in the most trying circumstances. The church that I felt God called me to was always small. There were times when it would have been so easy to give up and go to somewhere big and become a 'pew filler' with fewer responsibilities. That was the

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easy path that often looked so attractive. But had I taken that road then I am sure that I would not have learnt that God is able to keep me in whatever circumstance I find myself. It is vital for any family, for any individual, to find a

church where the Bible is faithfully taught and lived out actively, and then to be wholeheartedly committed to it. I can see now that many of the characteristics God taught me in dealing with difficulties in my church life also equipped me for dealing with difficulties in my married life or family life. They are the same kinds of character skills we all need to learn.

I have assumed that the normal family will want to all attend church together. I think this is essential. I would not want to make a rule that you must take a child to church from birth. Each couple must do as the Lord directs, but we took our children from the time they were babies, and I do not regret that decision. Sometimes, we would come away stressed and feeling we had got nothing from the service at all. And, of course, our children were always the noisiest there! But I am convinced that they learnt from their early days what it was to be in the presence of the Lord and that is an experience which is invaluable.

It is also a good habit to learn that Sunday morning is Jesus' time, ...

It is also a good habit to learn that Sunday morning is Jesus' time, and nothing else was allowed to take that away, except serious illness etc. I am deeply thankful that the rest of the congregation were always encouraging and tolerant of the noise our children made. It is so important to make everyone, but particularly the young children feel that being in church is their natural home. Stern words and sighs, tuts and the like have no place within the church. Pharaoh offered to let the men go out from Egypt, but Moses refused, saying the women and children must be included (see Exodus 10). The Levites were numbered including the babies from a month old (see Numbers 3). In the days of Ezra, all the people came to hear the law being read, including the children – and that went on for hours (see Nehemiah 8). I think it is sad and dangerous when children are not brought to

church and stay at home, usually with mum, thus depriving her of Jesus' time too.

As well as setting the children a good example in being committed to your local church, it is important for them not to hear the members of that church being criticised. If by our words we are constantly tearing down our fellow believers, then we cannot expect our children to respect them either, and who wants to learn from someone they do not respect? When I was a child we heard over and over again: 'If you haven't got anything nice to say, then don't say anything at all'. That is wise advice for every family!

'If you haven't got anything nice to say, then don't say anything at all'.

From the story of Naomi and Elimelech we have considered spiritual priorities within the family and the other great lesson we learn in the book of Ruth is how to properly judge what we have. When Naomi left Bethlehem she thought she was full. When she came back, she thought she was empty! I think the rest of her story would teach the exact opposite, and that she came to realise this over time. Yes, she left with a husband and two sons, but from the record we have, nothing good is said of them. She came back with just one daughter-in-law, but Ruth was of the highest moral and spiritual quality, again probably learnt from Naomi herself, within the home environment.

All too often, we count what we have in terms of bank balance, or numbers in church, or qualifications on a piece of paper. This is the way the world works and it is the worldliness that the Apostle John warns against in his three letters. Naomi lived in a society where boys were regarded far more highly than girls. The size of her family had halved, and was down to just one woman, and yet it was now in just such tiny circumstances that

... it was now in just such tiny circumstances that God was ready to work ...

God was ready to work a work that would lead to the salvation of the world! If only Naomi had realised what would come of her daughter-in-law she would never have felt bitter.

Sometimes, we fall into the same mistake, either with ourselves or with our children. We live in a society which is so focused on self-image and has so many problems because of it. This is because we have failed to learn for ourselves, and then to teach our children, that we are the people God intended us to be, strengths and weaknesses alike. When we see ourselves like this, then we can take the next step and realise that the only person whose opinion really matters is the Lord Jesus. Of course it is nice if others like us or respect what we do. But really that is a trivial side issue. What really matters is what God thinks of us. If we, and our children, live according to this, then we can be confident in an uncertain society. We need to celebrate the wonderful grace of God that has made us just the way we are.

What really matters is what God thinks of us.

So from Elimelech and Naomi we learn that Elimelech left the place where God had put him and it ended in disaster for him and his family. Teaching our children about spiritual priorities, including their spiritual home is, I think, the single most important task any parent can have. From Naomi we learn that it is not what things seem on the outside that really counts – it is Christian character and being ready to follow God at all costs. The family that gets these issues right is the family that will not go too far wrong.

EXAM 3 - Naomi and Elimelech

USE EXAM FORM B

Enter the correct answer:

1. The name Bethlehem means
 - a. house of the Lord
 - b. house of blessing
 - c. house of bread
2. The Moabites were descendants of
 - a. Abraham
 - b. Esau
 - c. Lot
3. Naomi asked to be called Mara which means
 - a. bitter
 - b. blessed
 - c. broken
4. Who is worse than an unbeliever according to 1 Timothy 5:8?
 - a. An apostate
 - b. One who does not provide for his own family
 - c. A murderer
5. The Levites were numbered from the age of
 - a. one year
 - b. one month
 - c. one day

Enter TRUE or FALSE:

6. The famine in Israel was a reflection of the poor spiritual state of the nation.
7. Ruth's spiritual insight was probably a reflection of Naomi's influence within the home.
8. The fact that Elimelech lived during a time of famine indicated that God did not really care for him.
9. Running away from problems is often the best solution to overcoming them.
10. Naomi's bitterness was a result of not properly appreciating what she had.

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

When deciding upon the kind of church God wants me to go to, what features should influence the decision?

Chapter 5

Hannah and Elkanah

1 Samuel chapters 1 – 2

If the story of Isaac and Rebekah started well and ended badly, we can say that the story of Hannah and Elkanah starts badly but ends well. Elkanah could probably trace his family back to Levi, the grandson of Isaac and Rebekah (1 Chronicles 6:33-38), although they lived in Ephraimite territory. He had two wives – Peninnah and Hannah. Whilst Peninnah had children, Hannah had none and this was a source of great distress to her. Although her husband loved her, probably more than he loved Peninnah, nothing could compensate for her sense of loss. For her part, Peninnah probably resented Elkanah's love for Hannah and mercilessly mocked her for her inability to have children. She was so cruel!

Every year this family went up to Shiloh to offer a sacrifice to the LORD. One year, while they were there, Hannah became so distressed that she pleaded with God, through her tears, for a son, making the bargain with God that if He were to give her a son, then she would give the boy back to God to serve Him for the rest of his days. Her tears and moving lips in silent prayer caused Eli the priest to think she was drunk, and he started to berate her for it. However, Hannah explained her situation and she was told by Eli that God had indeed heard her prayers. In due time she had a son and called him Samuel. Once he was weaned, Hannah brought Samuel back to Shiloh and placed him in the care of Eli the priest. She visited him each year with new

... God had indeed heard her prayers.

clothes, at the time of the annual sacrifice. It is as a boy that Samuel received the call of God to service, learning to recognise the voice of God. As an interesting, but not inconsequential aside, we find out that Hannah went on to have a further three sons and two daughters. God is indeed no man's (or woman's) debtor!

... within the family there is space for only one man and one woman, joined in marriage as a lifelong commitment.

What can we learn from these two chapters? Firstly, within the family there is space for only one man and one woman, joined in marriage as a lifelong commitment. The law of the land does not allow us more than one spouse at a time, and yet it is still possible to introduce 'third' parties into a marriage. Obtrusive 'in-laws', the secretary at work and the gym partner all stand as modern day Peninnahs. They may not really hold the heart's affection but they cause so much misery within marriage. It is all too easy to find others who may have something that our spouse does not have and be attracted to that.

Secondly, it is great to have spiritual ambition for our children. Hannah was absolutely clear, even from the time before she became pregnant, that she wanted her son to serve the LORD. She did not want her son to be a goat herder, or pot maker or apothecary. She wanted him to be given straight back to God as soon as he was old enough. We do not know exactly how old Samuel was when he was taken to serve God in Shiloh, but he may well have been between three and five years old. She could have waited until he was twelve – the age at which a Jewish boy became a man, but such was the clarity of her ambition for Samuel that this could not wait any longer than was necessary.

... she wanted her son to serve the LORD.

The issue of ambition for our children is one we must all face, and better it is done before we have them. Naturally speaking, parents want the best for their children. And so we must ask ourselves what is best. Paul gives us the answer in Philippians 3:8–10: “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death”.

*... I also
count all things
loss for the
excellence of the
knowledge of
Christ Jesus
my Lord, ..*

These deeply challenging words should lie at the heart of all Christian parenting. There really is only one goal to aim for as we bring up our children and that is that they, and we, might have just such a faith. In my life, in my family life and in my children’s lives, priority one should be that Christ is all in all, which is all very well, but how does it work out in practice? Well, we taught our children to read when they were young so that they would be able to read the Bible for themselves. Of course, it helped them when they went to school too! We spent time with them reading stories but those times always ended with a prayer, so that they could learn to pray for themselves. We encouraged them to work hard at school, not so that they would get straight ‘A’s but because hard work is a Christian behaviour. It makes me a little uneasy when I hear children being told they will get so much money for each exam they pass. Payment by results means that what is important is what is achieved not how it is achieved; far better to reward a child when they have worked hard and before the result is known!

It is right to encourage our children to use their abilities to the full, but that is not because we want to revel in the reflected glow of their success. Rather we view every ability they have as a gift that God has given them, and we ought never to treat His gifts cheaply. In many ways, the outcome may be the same, but the ethos, the motive for doing things is totally different. We encourage our children to do their best, not in order to get on in this world, to become rich etc. but so that God may use their abilities for His kingdom.

We encourage our children to do their best, ... so that God may use their abilities for His kingdom.

There are two spheres where this becomes really important: their choice of career and their choice of church. There is a real danger in pushing our children into a certain career path where they may end up spiritually damaged. The time and energy involved in achieving worldly success comes at the expense of spiritual concerns. And in terms of a church for our children, we should also want the best for them. What kinds of things influence the decisions we make - size of congregation, ability of the band and frequency of youth activities? All these things are good but respect for His word, a love for Christ and His people and a readiness to involve each one are better.

Hannah is a remarkable example for us all to follow. From the womb, if not before, we need to be spiritually ambitious for our children, and by this I mean that we have a real desire to see them come to know the Lord Jesus for themselves, and thereafter live for Him always. Our time, energy and resources need to focus on this, rather than other trifling achievements. But let us never think that there was no cost for Hannah in achieving her goal. It must have broken her heart that first time she turned her back on little Samuel and walked away. Her home would have seemed empty and her heart would have ached beyond bearing. I remember the time when our youngest son left home. Having dropped him at the airport, we got home and there was the

kitchen chair half out and empty, where an hour before he had sat and tied his laces. I burst into tears – what a big baby, and certainly not something I was used to!! And he was 21! How Hannah ever found the courage and strength to follow through with the promise she had made to God I just do not know. What a heroine of faith! But then, as we shall see God did not disappoint. We cannot hold our children close all the time, and have to be ready to let them go.

***God did not
disappoint.***

The world in which Hannah left Samuel was hardly the most encouraging. Old Eli the priest was in nominal charge, but the real power lay with his sons, and they were a nasty pair of men – spoilt rotten. What a great contrast! Hannah loved her son enough to give him back to God unspoilt, and he became a great man of God. Eli spoilt his sons, unable or unwilling to discipline them and they were lost to him completely. As parents today, we may worry about the kind of world in which our children are growing up. Well it was rotten then and it has not improved at

***... when we put in the
right godly foundations,
we can have confidence
in God, because He is
able and wants to
protect our children.***

all. And yet, when we put in the right godly foundations, we can have confidence in God, because He is able and wants to protect our children. I do not want to make rules on, for example, whether we home school, or Christian school our children because we are unhappy with the types of things that get taught in mainstream education. That is a decision all parents must make before the Lord. All I would say is, from the story of Hannah, we can see that Samuel was not spoilt by the environment in which he was raised. Our family and our environment may affect us but they do not determine us.

In John 17, Jesus did not pray that His disciples would be taken out of the world, so they would be spiritually preserved, but

rather that within the world His Father would keep them. And it is in this world that we must all learn to be a positive witness. The Jesuits used to say, 'Give me a child until he is seven, and I will show you the man.' As we bring our children up, particularly in those early years, we need to saturate their minds with things that are good and wholesome and beautiful and true. Then, when they are exposed to what is not good and wholesome and beautiful and true, they will have a strong ability to recognise wrong for what it is. Many a time, our children would come home and casually drop into the teatime conversation that 'so and so had said such and such, but that's not right is it?' and we would have the opportunity to develop what the Bible teaches with them. We should not want to put them into situations which we know will spiritually damage them, but neither should we over-protect them so that they do not understand the world in which they are growing up.

... we need to saturate their minds with things that are good and wholesome and beautiful and true.

To sum up then, from Hannah and Elkanah we learn that a marriage is big enough for only two adults and any children God may give them. That relationship must be exclusive to all others. We learn that spiritual ambition is the key thing for any parent. All that really matters is the relationship our children have with God – all else is secondary. And we must be ready to let go, trusting God to care for and keep our children. After all, they are His children and He is far better equipped to watch over and provide for them.

EXAM 4 - Hannah and Elkanah

USE EXAM FORM B

Enter the correct answer:

1. What relationship was Levi to Isaac?
 - a. Son
 - b. Grandson
 - c. Great-grandson
2. Hannah had
 - a. four sons and two daughters
 - b. three sons and two daughters
 - c. three sons and three daughters
3. According to Philippians 3:8, righteousness is a result of
 - a. right actions that come from reading the Bible
 - b. faith in Christ
 - c. the gift of God
4. The main thrust of Jesus' prayer for His disciples in John 17 was that they would
 - a. soon join Him in heaven
 - b. be His fearless followers
 - c. be kept while they were in the world
5. By spiritual ambition for our children we mean that they will
 - a. be famous in Christian service
 - b. achieve great things
 - c. have a right relationship with God

Enter TRUE or FALSE:

6. Every year Elkanah and Hannah went up to the temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifice to God.
7. The Bible views marriage as a lifelong commitment.
8. Hannah's promise to God led to her being happy all the time.
9. The best protection we can offer our children is to unreservedly give them back to God.
10. Our family and our environment determine who we are.

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

In today's society what may take the place of a 'second spouse'?

Chapter 6

David and His Many Wives

2 Samuel chapters 3 - 18.

Without doubt, David was one of the greatest heroes of the Old Testament. Defeating the giant Goliath, unifying the kingdom and expanding it, his mighty men and their exploits and his desire to build and provide for the temple were tremendous achievements to his credit. However, he had his faults and perhaps his family life was the greatest of these. Reading some of the key incidents in the above chapters leaves the distinct impression that, when David failed or succeeded, he did so on a spectacular scale.

... when David failed or succeeded, he did so on a spectacular scale.

Chapter 3 lists some of David's wives and children, although not all are mentioned there. We may be inclined to think that kings have to marry for political and strategic alliances, and so they might, but it still does not excuse going against the plan for marriage which God established from the very beginning. Neither does it explain the events of chapter 11, where David lusted after another man's wife, and determined to have her regardless of cost. There was no political advantage or marriage of necessity here – it was lust, plain and simple, and it was wrong.

In chapter 13 we read about Amnon, one of David's sons, who was consumed with lust for his half-sister and devised a plan so that he could seduce her. When this did not work out, because

of Tamar's purity, he raped her and then hated her. When Absalom, Tamar's brother and Amnon's half-brother, heard about this he was enraged, especially because Amnon appeared to go unpunished. Absalom devised a plot to have his revenge and ended up killing Amnon before fleeing to his mother's ancestral home for protection.

*... the name of God
was dishonoured ...*

He was forgiven, partially at first, and returned to his father, only to resent his own lack of power. Absalom's frustration led to outright rebellion, and David had to flee for his life. In the power struggle that followed, Absalom was killed and David was heartbroken at the news of his son's death. The whole sordid mess was no credit to David whatsoever! Even worse, the name of God was dishonoured in the surrounding nations. We should never forget that our actions, as well as our words, are judged by those we live among and they have a direct bearing upon how others think of the God whom we represent!

The big lesson that we need to learn from this whole situation is that families need effective discipline and a good example if they are to succeed. Naturally speaking, I hate confrontation – it is so much easier just to let things be, but not only is such a

*... families need
effective discipline
and a good
example if they
are to succeed.*

course of action merely delaying disaster, it is also a sign of absent love. We read in Hebrews 12:7-11 "If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no

chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

What should David have done? Amnon was clearly guilty of sibling rape and yet appears to have suffered little more than his father’s anger. Absalom exacts due punishment by taking Amnon’s life, but is then guilty of murder. There is an interesting part of the law that we read about in Deuteronomy 21:18 -21: “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not heed them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city. And they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall put away the evil from among you, and all Israel will hear and fear.” The law was clear: both boys should have been put to death though there is no record of this ever being put into practice in the history of Israel. By contrast God had one perfect Son, but He put Him to death so that we might be forgiven! Amazing grace!

I am not for one moment advocating a return to this stern justice system but it does highlight the absolute necessity for proper discipline within the family. Avoid it and the problems will not go away – they will just multiply. Society as a whole bears damning testimony to what happens when discipline is avoided in the home. So how do we practise discipline within the home? There are some who point to Proverbs 13:24, “he who spares his rod hates his own son” as biblical authority for corporal punishment and when MPs talk about

Society as a whole bears damning testimony to what happens when discipline is avoided in the home.

banning it they get very agitated, even to the extent of breaking the law. As a point of good exegesis, I do not think this verse is teaching that we must smack our children. It is teaching that we must discipline them.

However, I do not agree with those who equate smacking with child abuse either – it clearly is not. I used to smack our children on occasion, particularly when they were very small and not really able to understand other forms of discipline, and they were doing something dangerous, either to themselves or their siblings! Reasonable, controlled smacking can have a place in terms of reinforcing the message “NO”. However, I have to say that increasingly I found other forms of discipline far more effective. Isolation, a withdrawal of benefits / treats / toys all tended to be more likely to produce the required result.

We should not just punish wrong behaviour but also reward good behaviour and reinforce positive actions. So we had a rewards chart – do so many good things in a week, like making the bed, or putting away their toys unasked, and you were able

*Actively reinforcing
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is vital.*

to choose a video from the rental store to watch on Friday ‘chippy tea.’ Actively reinforcing and rewarding the kind of behaviour we want to see in our children is vital. Both forms of discipline need to be used. The key to effective discipline is that it must be relevant and understood by both the parent and the child, and in this lies David’s second big mistake.

Joab persuaded David to allow Absalom to return from Geshur but only to his own house – he was not even allowed to meet with his father. Absalom asked Joab to speak to the king on his behalf, but he would not – so Absalom burned Joab’s field. Joab naturally complained to the king, who summoned Absalom to

the palace. Absalom had behaved badly and got what he wanted in the first place! No wonder he later rebelled – what might that achieve?

Discipline needs to be consistent and relevant to the crime, and carried out in an appropriate time frame. A child burps after drinking a fizzy drink. Yesterday everyone laughed, but today he is sent to his room without any tea – that is inconsistent. Instead they are told to put their hand over their mouth and say ‘excuse me’ – that is relevant to the crime. Mum yells at the child

Discipline needs to be consistent and relevant to the crime, and carried out in an appropriate time frame.

“Just wait till your father gets home” – that is not an appropriate time frame – all it needed was an immediate demand for an apology. To equip our children for adult life and the world of work, they need to learn that there are consequences to their behaviour and that what is said to them will happen. Perhaps you can picture the harassed parent on the bus telling their child to take their feet off the chair over and over again. Nothing happens, so they are told they will not get any sweets. Still nothing happens, so they are told again ‘no sweets’. They burst into tears, and the sweets come out to console the child. They have learnt that they do not need to do what they are told, and that by behaving badly they can get what they want. You can spot them when they start work as adults – they are no different! Of course, if in the heat of the moment we say something that is clearly wrong, we should not be afraid to apologise to our children, or amend a punishment. They will learn much from that too!

One of the best pieces of advice I was given as a young parent was to choose your battles. Unless you want to make your time as a parent a continuous running argument, then you need to consider carefully what is truly

... choose your battles.

important. Does it really matter if they wear a football top to church or enjoy geography rather than physics? These are the kinds of things that we need to get straight as parents first. If you decide that it really does not matter, then it is best not to make an issue of it.

However, once you decide that something is ‘non-negotiable’ then ensure that you win the argument. It is absolutely essential, for both the parent and child, that it is clearly understood that when mum or dad say something then they mean it. And if there are not too many demands, then it is more likely that there will be opportunity to explain why a particular course of action is insisted on. ‘Because I say so’ may be sufficient reason when a child is young but as they get older, be ready to explain why ... and it may challenge you as to your own values and beliefs. If the only reason is ‘because I say so’ then I would suggest that you are on very weak ground! Because of David’s weak and ineffective discipline he almost lost his kingdom and certainly lost his sons!

... once you decide that something is ‘non-negotiable’ then ensure that you win the argument.

David’s third failure was in the fact that his forgiveness was uncertain and unclear. In 2 Samuel chapter 14, we are left wondering whether David had forgiven Absalom or not. Perhaps he did not even know himself! Forgiveness is one of the areas of family life in which we have a tremendous opportunity to display to our children the reality of our faith, as we imitate God’s forgiveness.

Forgiveness is one of the areas of family life in which we have a tremendous opportunity to display to our children the reality of our faith ...

One of my favourite stories of Jesus is found in Luke chapter 7,

where we read about the parable of the two debtors. Neither had the resources to repay the debt, and so they were both ‘frankly forgiven’. The debts of both were cancelled. There was absolute clarity as to their status. This is exactly what God has done for us. Though our sins have separated us from God, we have been completely and unconditionally forgiven through the death of the Lord Jesus. For sure, God desires a changed life and a commitment to Him, but that does not influence the measure of His forgiveness. Paul writes in Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.” We have been totally forgiven by God and now He expects us to act in a similar way, particularly within the family.

When a child breaks the rules then there need to be consequences. I remember one time when pocket money was stopped for several weeks, so that reparation could be made. However, as soon as the ‘sorry’ came with an admission of guilt, forgiveness had to be freely given. Learning to forgive means we do not keep raising the issue and accusing over and over again. It is in the past and needs to remain there. Learning to forgive means the return of normal relations between parent and child. Particularly when we are still cross, it is vital that we deal with our emotions – it is our problem not the child’s. They need to know that despite their wrongdoing they are still much loved and accepted for who they are, even when what they have done is unacceptable. And once an issue is dealt with, do not keep bringing it up in criticism. After all, would you like it if God dealt in such a way with you? He has certainly far more grounds for disappointment in your behaviour than we could ever have in our children’s! But then He never defines us outside of being ‘In Christ’.

... once an issue is dealt with, do not keep bringing it up in criticism.

In chapter 18, we see at least the third death of a son that could

be attributed to David's actions. Inevitably it leads to regret and remorse: "Absalom - if only I could have died instead of you". We need to soberly reflect on the fact that this is the inevitable consequence of a failure to discipline our children properly. Regret and remorse will not repair the damage already done because it comes too late! Unpleasant though taking the right actions would have been at the time, it would have been better for David in the long run. So much heartache might have been avoided.

And yet there is another lesson here, and it is one that is all too frequently overlooked. For all David's failure as a father, his sons Absalom and Amnon were both grown men, fully able to understand what they were doing and responsible for their own actions. Certainly, David had failed them both, but the responsibility for their actions lay entirely upon their own shoulders. Too often we take upon ourselves the burden of false responsibility. A son or daughter can make terrible choices as an

Parents should not take upon themselves a guilt that is not theirs.

adult and break their parents' hearts, choosing to reject the upbringing that they have had. But they are responsible for their own actions and cannot go on blaming their circumstances. Parents should not take upon themselves a guilt that is not theirs.

How wonderful it is that for all his failures as a father, David is still described as a 'man after God's own heart' (Acts 13:22). Here was a man who failed spectacularly at times, whom some might have judged and criticised, and yet God rightly values His servants and knows the true worth of each one. David should be an encouragement to us that, despite his many failings, as a parent and otherwise, God lavished His love and grace upon him and used mightily all that David gave to Him. He has not changed, and lavishes His love and grace upon us also, wanting to use all that we give to Him.

EXAM 5 - David and His Many Wives

USE EXAM FORM B

Enter the correct answer:

1. 2 Samuel ch11 gives us the name of one of David's wives. Who was she?
 - a. Michal
 - b. Bathsheba
 - c. Abigail
2. By strict obedience to the law, David ought to have put to death
 - a. Amnon
 - b. Absalom
 - c. both his sons
3. According to Heb 12:7-11, what is the fruit of discipline?
 - a. Obedience
 - b. Righteousness
 - c. Love
4. The key lesson from the Lord's parable in Luke 7 is that
 - a. God loves us unconditionally
 - b. God forgives us totally
 - c. God rewards us lavishly
5. Acts 13:22 describes David as a
 - a. great king
 - b. man after God's own heart
 - c. poor role model for fathers

Enter TRUE or FALSE:

6. Proverbs 13:24 must mean that parents should use physical punishment to discipline their children.
7. Discipline involves both saying 'no' and reinforcing right behaviour.
8. To be 'in Christ' means that we shall not come under God's condemnation.
9. The sins of adult children are also faults of their parents.
10. David's regret and remorse went some way in repairing the broken relationship his failure to discipline had caused.

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

What are the dangers in either failing to discipline or being too harsh ?

Chapter 7

Zechariah and Elizabeth

Luke chapter 1.

The last couple that we are going to study in this course is Zechariah and Elizabeth. From them we learn three vital lessons, namely togetherness within marriage, making choices over careers and learning to let go. They are a couple who set an example that is worth following. Zechariah was a priest and was on duty in the Temple in Jerusalem. We know from the Lord Jesus' own experience that the Temple at that time was pretty corrupt and the spiritual tone of the nation was not good. However, rather

They are a couple who set an example that is worth following.

than giving up and letting his own standards slip, Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were upright in God's sight. Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron, the first High Priest. So here we have a picture of a godly couple establishing a godly home in the middle of an ungodly generation. Following the Lord Jesus can sometimes be a lonely experience. Zechariah and Elizabeth did not have the comfort of being outwardly prosperous. They had no children, and by now they were getting old. But God had His eye on them for a very specific task. In a society that now wants

... God works to His timetable ...

everything straight away, it is important to remind ourselves that God works to His timetable and not ours! Probably they would have wanted children much earlier in their marriage, but God intended something different for them.

One dramatic day, Gabriel, the angel of the Lord appeared to

Zechariah as he was performing his temple duties, with news that would utterly transform their lives – Elizabeth was going to conceive and have a son. They were to give him the name John. Not only that, but a little of his future life’s work was revealed to them. He would be a Nazirite – an individual who was set apart for special service to God. Interestingly, from verse 13 we see that their childlessness had been a matter of prayer. This is always a good thing – praying for our children before we have them, while we have them and when they have left home, too, should always be on a parent’s “to do” list! Sadly, though their prayers were answered, Zechariah did not believe the answer!

... there is nothing that is too hard for God ...

Sometimes we too can be like that, praying for what we know to be right, but not really believing God will answer. Yet there is nothing that is too hard for God when we pray within His will (Genesis 18:14).

Because of his unbelief, Zechariah was struck dumb for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. However, just because he could not speak did not mean that they could not communicate, for when the baby was born, Elizabeth gave him the name John, even though it was not a family name.

When well meaning family and friends questioned this, Zechariah confirmed what his wife had said by writing it down, and immediately he was able to speak. He must have had so much to say after nine months of silence and yet what he did first was praise God. We always make time for what is a priority in our lives!

... what he did first was praise God. We always make time for what is a priority in our lives!

John was born a matter of months before Jesus was born and verse 80 is a summary of his early life: “And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.” From Luke 3:1 we see that John

appeared publicly to Israel around AD29, so he would have been in his early thirties. Emmaus has another course that looks at the life of John the Baptist, so we will leave his story now and focus on the three lessons which we learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Firstly, there is a real unity in the marriage of Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were both of the priestly tribe. They were both upright in the sight of God. They prayed that God would give them a son. They agreed that he would be called John, even though this did not fit in with the norms of society's rules. They agreed that he should be raised in a very particular way, as the angel had said, so that he would serve God. They remind me of another couple that we read about in the New Testament – Aquila and Priscilla – who laid their neck on the line for the sake of the Gospel and in helping the apostle Paul (Romans 16:3,4). It is vital for any marriage, especially once children arrive, that mum and dad are united and agreed in their approach to raising the children.

It is vital ... that mum and dad are united and agreed in their approach to raising the children.

Children can be really sneaky, and it will not take them too long to work out who is the best parent to ask to get the answer that they want! They will then quite happily play one parent off against the other if it suits their purposes. It is so important that they learn from an early age that mum and dad speak with one voice. Frequently, if I had just got in from work, a seemingly harmless question would be fired in my direction. Suspecting nothing I gave a careless answer and boom, World War 3 erupted! Only later did I find out that they had already asked Dawn and she had given a different answer. Far better to reply “What does mum say?” or “Let me check with mum first”. Thinking ahead is always valuable. There are some situations that all parents are

Thinking ahead is always valuable.

going to have to face and planning for them and how you are going to respond once they arrive can save a lot of grief later. However, some situations arise with no warning and then it is always best to say, “Wait, and mum and dad will talk about it.”

In general, I have noticed that it tends to be the mother who ends up as “bad cop” and the father who allows anything so that

Dads who neglect their home responsibilities fail to set their children a positive male role model.

he can have a quiet life. This is neither fair on the mother, nor is it a good example to set the children. Dads who neglect their home responsibilities fail to set their children a positive male role model.

A godly home will be one where both parents are united in decision making and in discipline. And in the long run, it saves a lot of grief. Once it becomes clear that trying to play mum off against dad does not work, a child will stop...and look for other sneaky tricks!

Secondly, we learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth the pattern for guiding a child in terms of their future career choice. In one sense John was quite unusual. There are not many instances when the life direction of a child is known before the child is even born. God clearly had a unique role for John, as the announcer and preparer of the way for His Son, Jesus. As parents, it is important to allow the Lord to make His will plain for a child’s life and to allow Him to decide the work He has in mind for each one of us. It would have been a disaster if Zechariah had decided that he wanted John to follow in his footsteps and learn to serve in the Temple, just as he did.

Forcing a child to do what we did, to be like us, is a sure recipe for disaster. They must determine their own convictions and make their own choices, increasingly so as they get

Forcing a child to do what we did ... is a sure recipe for disaster.

older. However, we can be sure that we will not go too far wrong by placing them in the Lord's hands and asking Him to guide them as they grow up, so that they will learn to serve Him for themselves, in whatever sphere He places them. I am quite sure that Zechariah and Elizabeth were fully supportive of John as he left home to live in the desert and prepare for his future service.

Finally, we learn the lesson of letting go. Although they may have been fully supportive of their son, it must have been really difficult for Zechariah and Elizabeth to 'let go'. I guess a majority of folks would have, at least secretly, thought John weird. After all it is not everyone who dresses in camel's hair and eats honey and locusts! I am sure there must have been times when they just wanted to keep him at home, and wished he was a bit more ordinary. However, there comes a time in every child's life when they need to move out and make their own way in life. Learning to deal with this, as parents, is important.

... there comes a time in every child's life when they need to move out and make their own way in life.

For me, there were times when the idea of all the children leaving home seemed quite attractive. Think of all the peace, and the time and money I would have – and having my wife to myself again! The reality has not been entirely as I would have expected. There are times when the house seems very lonely and empty and quiet. To misquote "Letting go, means letting go". Once children leave home and establish their own home, then a parent needs to understand that they have their own responsibilities and lives to live. The old rules that existed whilst they lived at home need to be replaced. Constant unannounced visits, trying financially to control their lives and telling them how to do things are not a good idea. If they want advice and help then they need to know that you are still there for them – a child

never stops being such just because they have grown up and left home! But they must be allowed the time and space to stand on their own two feet.

The first day or so after a child leaves home is definitely the hardest. Deliberately plan to be busy. Shut the bedroom door and leave it for another week. Realise that now they have left, there may be new opportunities to serve the Lord that lie on the horizon. The time that was rightly spent on family matters can now be used in direct Christian service, with a clear conscience. The somewhat rushed quiet time can now become a more detailed time of study and prayer. Wisely filling the time that is left vacant is vital, because if it is not used for God, then it will be filled with issues that hinder us spiritually. It is good to use some of that time to reaffirm the relationship with your spouse. Inevitably, during the roller-coaster that is family life, this relationship tends to get pushed down the priority list. Now is the time to put it back where it belongs – at the heart of the family. Time for just the two of you is necessary and should be enjoyed. After all, raising a family is a real achievement.

*Wisely
filling the
time that is
left vacant
is vital ...*

Zechariah and Elizabeth had done their job in raising John for the Lord. Now God would continue His work in teaching John all that he needed to know to prepare the way for Jesus. The first half of Luke chapter 3 shows us that God was entirely able to complete that task. And therein lies the great encouragement for every parent. We need to realise that we are workers together with God. He never makes mistakes, and is well able to over-rule the many that we make and ensure that His will is accomplished. So we can relax a bit in the knowledge that it is not all down to us.

*We need to realise
that we are workers
together with God.*

Paul knew something of this as he wrote to his spiritual children

in Philippians 1:6, “being confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ”, and in chapter 4:19: “And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” What a God we Christians have – not only is He able to help us in the big spiritual things like salvation, but He is able to help us in the everyday things like parenting, if we will allow Him to rule our lives and our homes.

So from this godly couple we learn that a united home is a happy home. Parenting is such a huge task that it needs both parents working together in unison to accomplish great things. Together they then require the help of God as they raise their children. But sometimes one parent may be absent and I am hugely encouraged by the example of the widow of Zarephath. We read about her in 1 Kings chapter 17. Here was a one-parent family that was “only just managing”. And yet God was able to provide for her in the most wonderful way. She had just enough flour and oil to make a last loaf of bread before starvation would overtake them. God was watching over them, however, and sent the prophet Elijah to care for them. He did so in the strangest of ways. He begins by asking for what little she had left. But once this was given, she found out that Elijah’s God was able to provide amply for her and her son. What she could not do alone, God was more than able to do. And that is an important lesson for any and every family to learn!

Parenting is such a huge task that it needs both parents working together in unison to accomplish great things.

... they need to follow the path that God guides them

We have seen that Zechariah and Elizabeth also show us the importance of supporting our children as they make their way in the world, growing into adulthood. Their life path before the Lord may well not be the path we would have chosen for them, but that is okay. They are not

us, and they need to follow the path that God guides them in.

We have also learnt from Zechariah and Elizabeth that there comes a time in every parent's life when they must let go of their children. As they reach adulthood and leave home we need to let them stand on their own feet and live their own lives. We need to look to find new opportunities to serve the Lord as we lay one task down, and be ready to take up another.

Conclusion

*... we have learnt
the importance of
doing things
God's way ...*

Over this course we have learnt the importance of doing things God's way and the problems that arise when we try to go our own way. Abraham and Sarah displayed real faith as they left so much that was familiar behind and followed the calling of God. But when they stopped listening to His voice and tried to do things according to their own wisdom they got into real difficulty. We also saw that children learn best by example.

Isaac and Rebekah began their married life in an atmosphere of prayer but their secrets and lack of communication soon caused tragedy and heartbreak. We have acknowledged the importance of having spiritual ambition for our children – they belong to God and we are just caretakers for a few years of their lives. We have also seen that it is essential to have a co-ordinated approach, without favourites.

Elkanah and Hannah teach us that the best way of protecting our children is to hand them back to God. He is able to keep

*... the best way of
protecting our
children is to hand
them back to God.*

them even in the worst of societies. We have looked at having right priorities for our children and the importance of a spiritual home where we judge things properly.

Naomi and Elimelech did not always value the things that God had given them but God was able to carry on His work and through Ruth's family line came the Saviour, Jesus Christ.

We have looked at the vital matter of discipline, and how neglecting this will lead to disaster. Discipline is never pleasant – for parent or child. But the cost of not exerting proper discipline is far more unpleasant.

We have learnt that the only real question for us as parents is understanding what the Lord wants for our children. Zechariah and Elizabeth knew this as they raised their son John. They were then ready to let go – handing him back to God. We need to do this, surrounding our children with our prayers that in time they may live for Him, and should God so desire, bring their own children up for Him. Ah, now grandchildren are a wonderful blessing from the Lord!

... the only real question for us as parents is understanding what the Lord wants for our children.

EXAM 6 - Zechariah and Elizabeth

USE EXAM FORM B

Enter the correct answer:

1. Which of the following statements is true?
 - a. Zechariah was a descendant of Aaron, the first High Priest, but Elizabeth was not
 - b. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were descendants of Aaron
 - c. Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron, but not Zechariah
2. Who did God send to announce the birth of John Baptist?
 - a. Michael
 - b. The Angel of the Lord
 - c. Gabriel
3. About when did John the Baptist begin his public ministry?
 - a. AD25
 - b. AD29
 - c. AD33
4. Which couple do we read 'laid their neck on the line' for the sake of the Gospel?
 - a. Ananias and Sapphira
 - b. Aquila and Priscilla
 - c. Zechariah and Elizabeth
5. What three strange things are associated with John Baptist?
 - a. Locusts, honey and camel's hair
 - b. Quail, manna and a seamless cloak
 - c. No meat, wine or leavened bread

Enter TRUE or FALSE:

6. Zechariah believed Gabriel's message about the birth of John the Baptist.
7. Zechariah was deaf and dumb because he did not believe God had answered his prayers.
8. A godly home is one where both parents are united in decision-making and discipline.
9. Zechariah and Elizabeth knew what their son was going to do before he was born.
10. Peter wrote about God as the One who has begun a good work and is able to complete it.

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

In what ways might we try to influence our children once they have left home and what consequences could this have?

