

CHRISTIAN HOME AND FAMILY LIVING

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE HUSBAND AS A FATHER

Genesis 28:10-22; 32; 33; 35:9-15

God . . . answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went
(Genesis 35:3)

The fathers of the Bible have left their footprints on the sands of time. Some they made carelessly, others deliberately and with close attention to duty. Some of the fathers were selfish, even cruel, as their skirts swept the plains of Judah and the hills of Ephraim; others walked firmly and on holy ground—they were the proverbial giants in the earth. Many of these fathers were loved, venerated and copied; others were followed down the path of life in fear or folly. Their trails are left for all to observe, to avoid or to pursue.

As we “watch the race of men go by” on the pages of the Old Testament it is easy to see the pivotal place of the father in the social scheme. The mother is invariably named as the wife or daughter of a certain man or father. Children find their place as the son or daughter of Gomer or Javan, or Jacob . . . It is the earthly or natural fathers of which the Old Testament so dramatically tells us. It is worthy of note that of the more than thousand times a father is mentioned, less than ten refer to the eternal Father of all mankind.

By contrast, nearly all of the references in the New Testament are to the Father in heaven. Beginning with pious Joseph, priestly Zacharias, and generous Zebedee, emphasis turns almost wholly to the Father whose spiritual children we are by faith in His beloved Son.

Jesus came to reveal the Father (John 14:8-11) the same Father that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had seen figuratively in the cloud, in the sea and by the brook, in the manna and in the rock. The Old Testament shows a fatherhood marred by sin, by physical, material, and spiritual inadequacy. In the New Testament the Father is revealed in all the perfection of His beauty and love. **“I write unto you, fathers” . . . that “the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth”** (I John 2:8, 13).

“The entrance of thy word giveth light; it giveth understanding” for Christian fatherhood.

It may seem shortsighted to turn back the pages of the years to learn how to be a modern father when so much is being offered to help us today. Yet, as saintly F. B. Meyer writes, human life and discipline is much the same, whether lived two thousand years on this side of the Cross or two thousand years on the other side of the Cross; whether hidden beneath a gray business suit, or the flowing robes of an Arab sheik; whether spent in the smoky shadows of the city or in the free, sunlit pasture lands of Southern Palestine.

We will not choose Abraham, who was a hero and above us, from among the men with the flowing robes. Instead we will try to learn from Jacob, who was “**a plain man dwelling in tents,**” whose checkered life is more like our own. His failings, aspirations and sorrows speak to us. Jacob was an imperfect father with an imperfect personality. He can be called the greatest schemer of all times, yet within his very being was a deep spirituality and seeing faith (Genesis 49:18) which was purified by strenuous and lifelong discipline.

What could be more inspiring and encouraging than the example of the imperfect man whom God often spoke to, and always led, and on whom He conferred the title, Prince with God.

A father is a many-sided person. He is a provider, protector, citizen, leader and follower, educator and disciplinarian, a counselor, good husband and sage grandfather. In any language, a father is the source and prototype of life: the one from whom I get my strength—or lack of strength, according as he provides materially and spiritually for the growth and development of the children whom he “begets.”

What kind of father a man is depends on his personality and on how close he lives to God.

Christian fathers are educated and enabled for their task, not only by the pressure of circumstances, but by leaning on their Source of strength with the tenacity of Jacob (see Genesis 32:24-28). Fathers who think that they are perfect, who think that they are always right, always have the only answer, the best way and the last word, may be sure that they are not.

Men grow, by the grace of God, into competent fatherhood. It took Jacob twenty years from the night he met God at the “**gate of heaven**” (Genesis 28:17) until the day he was named and characterized Israel, Prince with God. It was at the sunrise of a new day, when he clung, crippled, to the Man from heaven, that he learned his new name. And yet, he was not a perfect father, for he turned from that glorious encounter to display his old cunning when he unexpectedly met his brother Esau in the wilderness. He was afraid (Genesis 32:7) though he had “**power with God**” (32:28), and divine protection (32:1, 2); he schemed to save his family (33:1, 2); he deceived Esau when he promised to follow him to Seir for a visit but went to Succoth instead (33:12-17). What conflicts and tensions, what sin and zeal are evident in this father!

“**Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been,**” he humbly told Pharaoh. At the same time he was loved and highly respected by his family (49; 50:1-13) and by the nation which has ever since proudly called him “**Our father Jacob.**” It is only imperfect men who can “**grow in grace**” and the fear and knowledge of God to full and rewarding fatherhood.

The first duty of a father is to provide for the needs of his family. He can neither be called a father nor a Christian unless he does (I Timothy 5:8). Jesus says that a father knows the needs of his children and will supply them (Luke 11:11; 12: 29, 30). Fathers, not mothers, are called the “feeders of the world,” and a child has a rightful claim to his father’s care.

Today’s father is not always sure of his place in the family. He is nagged by a persistent suspicion that he is no longer the head of the family, and he wonders what has led to his abdication or dismissal. Many factors enter in, to be sure, but not the least important is the factor of the wife’s becoming an additional breadwinner. This has built up the false security that the father is not too indispensable because the mother can do everything.

A double income is a dangerous thing on which to base a family’s living standard. It encourages unnecessary spending, or even plunging into serious debts. It may raise the standard of living to dazzling, but temporary, heights. When the mother has to give up her job for one reason or another the family often cannot deny itself the extra things a double income has allowed. How easily luxuries become necessities! When heavy debts drag on they cause discontent and greater insecurity than ever before. A father may provide luxuries if he can, but he must provide security.

Neither is it safe for a young man to plan a college career on his bride’s income. When a wife is incapacitated or a family demands her energy, he may have to radically change his course. He may even close the door to a higher calling by his own impatience. No young man should marry unless he knows that he can provide for his wife and family. Whenever we deviate from the divine blueprint for the family we endanger our success and happiness.

Jacob provided well for the material necessities of his family, although he was not so fortunate as to inherit his father’s prosperous business (Genesis 26:12-16). He started out with only his staff and a cruse of oil (32:10) and built, through steady toil and his own business acumen (30:25-43; 31:36-42), a large fortune (30:43). Jacob’s family was well dressed, fed and housed.

It is especially a father’s duty to teach his sons how to be good providers. We know that every son is a potential father. We are taught that in such seemingly unimportant places as the genealogies, where we plainly see that every son was begotten to be a father.

- Jacob taught his sons to be successful cattle men and shepherds (46:32);
- Zebedee’s sons learned the fisherman’s craft,
- Joseph’s sons to use the hammer and the chisel.

However, a son need not be a farmer or a trucker just because his father is one. Today we have the luxury of teaching our sons how to provide according to their abilities. Many a selfish or shortsighted father dictates what vocation his son will follow. Seldom are two sons alike in their talents and capacities, and no father provides well who ignores this fact.

Who knows what latent talents lie deeply hidden in a young boy’s heart, only awaiting the interest and encouragement of his father?

Joseph, the boy a father hardly understood (37:10), the sissy among the rough and ready brothers became, at thirty, a great governor and financier (42:6; 47:13-26).

When John Jacob Astor wanted to leave his little village in Austria to make a living in his own way, he was cursed by his butcher father. He finally left, with two dollars in his pocket, to become one of America's wealthiest men. Martin Luther's father stubbornly insisted that his son become a lawyer, but the Spirit led him to become one of the greatest of religious reformers. Isaac was proud of strong, handsome, self-assured Esau. He planned and prepared to make him his successor. Father Isaac almost despised dark, slim, quiet Jacob and saw little success in his future. Yet this "mother's boy" was the son with the latent potential for true greatness, and became the father of a nation called by his name.

The cost of maintaining and educating a family is great these days. With every advance in civilization greater demands are made on the provider. Pressed on every side by a family that has known only prosperity, many a father makes mistakes in family finance. Every man likes to live "**under his vine and under his fig tree**" (I Kings 4:25) but he must realize that there is "**oil in the dwelling of the wise; but a foolish man spendeth it up**" (Proverbs 21:20).

Money matters are the natural responsibility of leadership, but only where there is financial teamwork will there be "**oil in the dwelling.**" Happy is the man who has a prudent wife whom he can trust to do him good all the days of his life (Proverbs 14:1; 31:10ff.).

Children should be taught early what they can afford to want and also, by the wise counsel and example of parents, not to torment themselves to attain the unattainable in luxuries, gadgets and cars as soon as they begin their own homes. The new regime may demand a rigorous simplicity, but such restrictions are often character-building. Let life be full of pleasant anticipations and surprises, rather than premature worries and pressures.

However, a husband should love the comfort of his wife and children more than his bank account. A husband whose wife has to wheedle out of him every dollar, is bound to implant a poor sense of values in his children. A father should be wise, but generous, with his money, remembering that he is but a steward of all he possesses. Jacob knew that all he owned was the gift of God (Genesis 31:9, 42). He also understood his Kingdom obligations, for he vowed, ". . . **and of all that thou shalt give me I will give the tenth unto thee**" (28:22).

A child also has an innate right to receive these spiritual necessities for life from his father: a warm sense of security; the sterling example of integrity; and a continuing devotion that a child can respect and trust.

It is a false philosophy which says in effect: "I earn money for food, shelter and clothing and look after the family interests outside the home; it is my wife's duty to do the rest." Not only mothers, but also fathers are told implicitly to bring up the children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

A child does not feel secure unless he knows that he is loved.

Each child should be loved as generously as if he were the only son, and every child should share equally in a father's devotion. But do we love them all alike? How different the children in one family can be. One may be open, social and easy to love; another studious, withdrawn and hard to reach; one is strong, dynamic or talented, and we cannot hide our pride; still another scrawny, perhaps homely, with a personality that somehow irritates—and we inadvertently show more hostility than love.

Often it is the unlovable one who needs our love badly, but he does not meet up to our expectations and we are disappointed, and the child senses it and returns our hostility. Isaac loved one of his sons, was proud of his manliness, his courage and his love of life. Although the rejection of Jacob by his father was made up to some extent by the love of his mother, he starved for the manly independence and integrity that only a father can instill in a son.

Neither could Jacob hide his favoritism for his handsome, serious and loving Joseph. Perhaps he justified it, but it made the brothers hate and quarrel, until their father was bowed down with grief (Genesis 37).

Jacob-like, we often give the youngest one every material and educational advantage that money can buy, whereas the oldest child had to work for his own necessities. Or the reverse may be true: We could hardly wait to buy our oldest son a car, but the others have to buy their own or go without. Things change, environments and fortunes change, parents change, values seem to change. One child is strictly supervised when he reaches the "terrible teens"; we turn deaf ears to another's footsteps that are late. Children may in turn be the objects of a parent's love, hostility, guilt, anxiety or ambitions, and today's children sense it as much as Reuben and Levi did.

Like Jacob, we sometimes grieve and can't understand the reactions of our children (Genesis 34:30; 49:3-7, 22, 23). Is it true that parental love and acceptance of a child creates strength of personality, but that rejection creates weakness? So we are being told today by some who study child behavior.

Earthly fathers are created in the image of the Heavenly Father who loved the unlovable so much that He gave His own Son to redeem each one of His children to glorious perfection. "**Beloved, if God so loved us,**" so should we also love our children. "**If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.**" A father who loves fully and constantly reflects the Heavenly Father and becomes, by transfer, one from whom each gets his strength.

The father also provides for the moral and spiritual and even material good of his children through discipline. Discipline is love. Jacob learned by many trying experiences that "**the Lord chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.**" He learned that because the Lord loved him, He wanted him to live in a way that would bring happiness, peace and contentment to himself and to his family (Hebrews 12:6-11). He had to be made receptive to the power and love of God. He had to learn to enjoy the fellowship of his own Heavenly Father, and to find perfect security in the knowledge that his Father was providing for his every need (Genesis 28:15, 20, 21; 31:42; 32:26-31).

If discipline is love it will result in security. Pointless and arbitrary commands, autocratic dictation, discipline to satisfy personal whims will not result in security. Unstable, uninformed, selfish or temperamental parents can irritate their children, annoy them, hinder them, arouse their enmity and, in general, put them on the defensive in a pathetic sort of way.

Every father should give personal attention to a word from his counselor: “**Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged**” (Colossians 3:21). Punishments for trivial faults, just to show authority, making a child beg for something he needs, threats, criticism, ridicule, blame, unfair comparisons, petty slight, are not worthy of a Christian father. The only permissible object of discipline, or reason for denying one thing or giving another, is that which will serve the highest interests of the child.

Can anything do more spiritual and moral damage to a child than a double-minded home where precept and example conflict? Did pert Dinah, perhaps, think there was no evil in making friends with heathen young people because her father himself bought a lot and spread his tent on the city limits of Shalem? (Genesis 33:18, 19)

If he could be on friendly terms with Hamor, why not she with Shechem, Hamor’s son? Doubtless, Jacob’s cleverness in outwitting Laban was often the subject of family conversation; business is business, you know, and a man has to be wide awake these days, take every advantage (even if it is of another) when he has a family to support.

Did the boys see that cheating and lying did not pay? Their father had prospered! Was the story Jacob told of his own boyhood one of love for his brother? Or was it one of hate and double-dealing? Maybe they would prosper too if they got rid of “**the dreamer.**” Did Jacob’s actions thunder so loud that they could not hear what he said? It took many long years, much trial, error and sorrow before father Jacob learned to practice consistently what he preached.

We wonder if father Jacob had the time for frequent heart-to-heart talks with his boys, or if he was as occupied with his great possessions as modern fathers are with their business, bowling or serious extra-curricular activities.

A father who is easily accessible is in a strategic position to teach his children the values of truth, honesty, dependability and love. Counseling is not a matter of lecturing but, first of all, of listening—patient, quiet listening—for the undertones of a child’s fears, feelings and desires. Fathers have no time to lose. Time is fleeting and life is but a little day (Genesis 47:9).

The tousled, trusting lad today is a man tomorrow.

A father must respect his own spiritual needs in order that he may transmit the spiritual heritage of the fathers throughout the generations. Here Jacob is an illustrious example to his sons of deep spiritual devotion; of wrestling and persistency in prayer; and of power with the Almighty. In his prayer (Genesis 32:9-12) we see his humility, his sense of sin and need and his unwavering faith in the God of his fathers.

He built an altar to God the God of Israel wherever he pitched his tents, and worshiped with his family. By faith he met the Invisible One face to face (Genesis 28:13; 32:1, 2, 24ff.), and persistently held before his children the reality of the Unseen. He handed down the promise of the God of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac, to his own children and through them to the Israel of all ages (28:3, 4, 13-15; 35:9-15; 48:15, 16; 49:8-12, 24-26). He passed from life commanding “**Blessings . . . of the Almighty . . . unto the uttermost bounds of the everlasting hills**” upon his sons, the fathers of a new day and generation.

Every father who will “**lead on softly according as the . . . children are able to endure**” (33:14), whose hope is in the Lord his God, may have the God of Jacob for his help (Psalm 146:5).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is a father?
2. What are the special duties of a father?
3. Do you believe a father can or should be a pal to his son?
4. Name several things that children have a right to expect from their fathers.
5. What is basic to the internal security of the child?
6. What is discipline? What may be the only object of discipline? How can this be defeated?
7. Are our children impressed more by what we tell them to do or by what they see us do? Explain.
8. Does the father always make the best keeper of the family finances?
9. Suggest how children can be taught the value of money. Should children be given an allowance? If so, on what basis?
10. What value can you see in budgeting the family finances?
11. Should children pay board? Why, or why not?
12. Is it good of a father to make his young son financially secure? Explain.
13. How does a man learn Christian fatherhood?
14. How can the mother effectively build up appreciation for the father in the family?
15. How did Jacob transmit the spiritual heritage of his fathers to his children? How can modern fathers do the same?
16. Read Genesis chapters twenty-seven to forty-nine to discover Jacob’s deep spirituality.
17. When is a father’s task completed? Explain.

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