

Parents as Shepherds

Purpose:

1. To help every family leader come to terms with what it means to be the family's shepherd.
2. To lay out some of the gifts, direction and care a child needs that require good shepherding courage, attention and wise skills.
3. To pass on to the children God's word that has brought security and confidence to the shepherd in facing life's trials.

We have identified the presence of wolves in the lives of all of us. Recognizing who they are and the harm they can cause, if we are awake, we realize we have a real challenge on our hands. That challenge becomes more acute when we understand that not only are we adults vulnerable like sheep but even more, our precious young ones who are even more vulnerable. As grown-ups we can comprehend more how being vulnerable can affect our lives. Will our children recognize that as well? Probably not! It is doubtful a sheep says to itself, "I am really vulnerable, defenseless, much more than most other animals. I really need a shepherd to be there or bad things are going to happen that I'm not ready for." So, whether our children recognize their vulnerability or not, it is still helpful for parents and grandparents to consider themselves as shepherds.

Consider Ezekiel chapter 34 which contrasts spiritual and political leaders as shepherds to God as a shepherd. But listen to these words to a shepherd in Ezekiel 34, verses 1-6 and see if this passage does also fit when one thinks of all the tasks a parent has. Why is that so? Whether a child can articulate their need for a shepherd-like person or not, it is obvious they have a great need for such a person.

If we look at Psalm 23 which starts out, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The truth is right there in front of us. The only way a child can feel secure and without want is for someone to constantly provide what they need. They need food, care, safety and routine. If they don't have these, in some instances they will soon let us know, YET they may be blind to dangers near them. When we think of our offspring, we realize how important it is that they have Jesus as their Good Shepherd. He provides for them and us what we could never provide by ourselves: truth, grace, forgiveness, life eternal. He is still with us through the Holy Spirit. Where does that leave us? By God's good grace, on earth God has provided children with parents to raise them. They are the under-shepherds right here on this planet in the lives of their children. They have God-given authority, the calling from God to be the earthly shepherds of their children.

Discussion Questions: In the plan of God, what is it that has you think parents and grandparents are important to their offspring's lives? How do you see the relationship between Jesus, the Good Shepherd and family leaders, both playing the role of shepherds in different ways?

So, if we stick with Psalm 23, we begin to see what it is a shepherd provides and what we as family leaders can provide as well. Let's see how this works. "He makes me lie down in green pastures." Sheep don't have the skills to discover where the pastures are green. The shepherd has the communication skills, the discovery skills to locate where a green pasture is. Likewise, a faithful parent will figure out how to locate the kind of food the child needs to survive. Parents are on the lookout for not only where they can obtain such food, but what they will have to do to buy it or grow



it.

Discussion Questions: Have you ever been concerned about having food on the table for your kids? We don't want to overlook this basic responsibility parents have. It might mean real sacrifice on their part to provide this. What steps do you see you have had to take to make sure your children will not go undernourished? Consider that overspending on non-necessities, neglect or idleness may cause this responsibility to not be fulfilled. What might be some examples of neglect or idleness that results in children being undernourished?

Of course, a child has more wants than food. We know they want attention, love, security, responses that gratify. As they grow older, they need to be noticed, affirmed, enjoyed, played with, listened to, acknowledged for progress. Boys need to be challenged with chances to show what it takes to be manlike. They need adventure. Girls need to be treasured as lovely young women. Both need to be understood and that will mean they will need times they can voice their experiences, upsets, successes, questions. They will need limits, boundaries for they do not have the experiences to know what is good for them in some instances. It's unfortunate when a child is neglected. When they are left to figure out everything on his or her own. When they don't have a sense of direction or anyone to bring correction when going down the wrong path or doing something an improper way or simply being rebellious.

Discussion Questions: When you think of what was just read, what is one need you have done well in fulfilling for one of your children or perhaps all? What is one thing you see you could be better at?

"He leads me besides still waters." Sheep are sensitive, easily spooked. They don't want to go near fast flowing water. The shepherd has to find a place where the stream has little current so they feel free to drink. Forcing a child to be doing something before they have any confidence to do it can be damaging. Every child is unique and what they might be afraid of could be different. The thoughtful parent will bring a child along at a pace that works for that child. We must remember every child might have different reactions, responses.

Here is a story from Edna Ferber's novel *Giant* referred to by John R. W. Stott. "It is the story of Jordan Benedict, a Texan. Owner of a two and a half million-acre cattle ranch, he is furious because his infant son, Jordy, aged three, does not take to horses. When set on one in full cowboy regalia, Jordy cries to be taken down. His father is disgusted, 'I rode before I could walk', he says. 'All right', responds his wife Leslie, 'that was cute, but that was you. This is another person. Maybe he doesn't like horses...' 'He's a Benedict,' his father retorts, 'and I'm going to make a horseman out of him if I have to tie him to do it'. 'You've been playing God so long you think you run the world'. 'I run the part of it that's mine'. His wife replies, "He's not yours. He's yours and mine. And not even ours. He's himself..."

The shepherd is tending sheep. That means he or she is not there to change the sheep's nature but to recognize what sheep are like and to take care of them accordingly. At the same time the faithful shepherd begins to discern the different characteristics each sheep has that might be distinct from the other sheep.

Discussion Questions: In what ways might a parent use a child for the parent's own benefit as we

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found a shepherd seeing his sheep as there to provide for himself? (Read Ezekiel 34:1-6) What have you learned about the differences between your children? What adjustments in your thinking and approach might be good and benefit the ones you are thinking about?

“He restores my soul”. Here is where we family leaders may be challenged. We know we sometimes get upset and scared. Fear is a powerful thing and it can destabilize us and our children.

The shepherd knows the sheep are not going to settle down on their own. This is the time when the shepherd needs to be there as the stabilizing force. Here is where leadership and faith become important. There are times when fear, chaos, screaming, blaming, complaining can take over.

Read Psalm 91.

Discussion Questions: This is a psalm about someone who could be feeling unprotected but then what is said here that would restore one’s soul?

Once spooked, once agitated, can a sheep be settled down, become calm again, have fear fade? How important is it for a parent to recognize the need a child has for feeling secure, feeling loved? When parents fight or storms hit, is the parent thinking how inwardly upset the child might be? What is your experience? Is attention paid to the child’s sense of security and being cared for? Do parents just expect their child should take in upsetting situations and then somehow become stabilized and calmed naturally? A parent’s intuition may be saying, “My child emotional and spiritual needs must attended to”. What problems might arise if this is overdone?

A German pastor, Helmut Thielicke tells the story of a teenage boy who writes to him believing he will understand the boy’s situation. The boy tells him that he is going to commit suicide. He sees his parents don’t understand at all what he is going through, the dilemmas he is facing. They have no idea what he is dealing with. After writing this letter, the boy does commit suicide. So this story has a very sad ending. The boy had come to believe his parents were not aware at all of his inward struggles. When that happens, perhaps a child comes to believe his or her parents don’t care. This could be even when the parents are believing they are attentive to the boy but they had no idea of what he was dealing with.

Discussion Questions: What kind of challenges might a teenager, for example, be facing of which parents might have no clue? How important is it to your child that you understand what they are going through?

Many crucial decisions are made by teenagers navigating their way through the minefields of teenagers’ lives. What do you see is the parents or grandparent’s role in all this? How important do you think it is that parents and yes, grandparents have built trusting relationships with a child before some of these dilemmas and challenges surface?

“He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake”. It is common, that much of what is going on in a home is left unsaid. That might be how the parents were themselves raised. Children need understanding of what is going on, explanations of why things are done in a certain way, what is the difference between right and wrong. A child often does not know what the parents believe. For instance, if someone touches a child in the child’s private parts, is this an acceptable behavior or not? Here is the kind of situation where such matters need to be discussed and direction given. One of the

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responsibilities of parents is to help the child be recognizing and discerning when it comes to certain behaviors and attitudes. Here is where Bible stories and teachings can be discussed. Conversations about faith and life can be shared. Always remember children do not have the pre-frontal cortex of their brain yet fully developed. This means they do not foresee what consequences of their actions might result. Or have a more mature brain to bring good judgment to a situation.

Discussion Questions: Can you think of some things where parents might assume that their child knows something, has thought about something, understands what the parents think but actually the whole thing might be brand new to the child? Perhaps they have no clue how to respond?

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, but you are with me, your rod and your staff—they comfort me.” Whether we like it or not, we live in world of dark valleys, of death facing us some time or another. When my wife was dying, my own children and many of their children were there in the room, recognizing death was on its way. Our lives do not go on forever on this earth. A funeral director told me, “Everyone needs to stand next to the hole that will be dug where their own dead body will be placed and from that recognition, live their lives.” How does a parent help a child come to terms with this truth?

According to this psalm recognizing the reality of death is only the beginning. What word needs to be spoken in the face of this? “You are with me, your rod and your staff—they comfort me.” The world is a dangerous place. Every person will find themselves in situations where the prospect of death is near at hand. This is where knowing what Jesus did for us, dying in our place, securing victory over death by being raised to life becomes the Good News that needs to be shared ahead of time. God has given us the victory over death and each one of our children need to hear that, know that, review that. The Bible keeps telling us “Rejoice in the Lord always”. Are our offspring thinking this way? Why is the staff a comfort? I heard of a shepherd in Africa who had a staff. When a snake threatened to bite one of the sheep, the shepherd took his staff and used it to come down hard on the snake’s head. A shepherd also uses the staff to more strongly exert his authority and to gently but firmly, pull the sheep back to the fold and keep the sheep moving in the right direction. He can also use the crook of the staff to pull the sheep from harm, from falling into a hole or over a cliff.

Discussion Questions: Is it a good idea to talk to our children about death, its reality? Have any of your children gone to a funeral or did someone they knew personally die? Did they express any feeling about that? Is there any conversation in such situations that could be helpful? What are some of the ways parents or grandparents have that might protect their offspring from an early death or danger?

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” As a family member who is a shepherd there will be many trials. I will find people competing against me—wolves. Sometimes it will seem too much to bear. Nevertheless, the reality is God is with me, God is faithful, God’s blessing is upon me, his grace is sufficient. When we look at the life of David and what he went through, the life of Jesus and Paul, we see much heartache and persecution. Nevertheless, good things happened. Much fruit came out of those lives. As family leaders, we can count on God to see us through. It is the presence of God and

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his blessing, the truth that he is right there with us all the way. This is what makes us more than conquerors. So, we are not alone in our shepherding but can always look to God for strength, grace and wisdom.

Discussion Questions: There will be times when in our efforts to be good shepherds to our offspring, everything may seem to fall apart. What is it that we are to remember and claim even at these low times?

Straightforward communication can be very helpful. Telling a child, “I am your protector, that is the job God has given me. Remember to come to me when you sense danger, when someone is becoming too friendly to you or seeking to invade your space. As you grow older, we are going to be talking more about how you can defend yourself. God has provided wisdom and weapons for you to be able to fend off problems you don’t need, dangers you will be able to avoid.”

Discussion Questions: What are some of the words and topics you believe your child needs to hear from you? How much interest do you have in learning more about protecting your child? About equipping your child with wise skills? Have you discovered any resources you have found to be helpful in this regard? If so, share what you have learned.

Summary:

1. Recognizing how important we parents and grandparents are in meeting the many needs a child has in getting through all that child’s growing up years.
2. To ask ourselves to courageously confront the challenges both we and our offspring face as we live in this world.
3. To point out what we have discovered in God’s word that helps us deal with life’s realities and pass that on to our offspring.

Prayer Suggestions:

1. Thank you that we are never completely hopeless for God is always there to provide.
2. For guidance and direction from God as to how to shepherd those young sheep in our own family.
3. Praise God for being with us in the darkest of times, for Christ’s victory over death, our own deaths.
4. For protecting us and giving us the tools by which we can protect our loved ones.

Supplemental Reading

Hired man runs away John 10

Ezekiel 34

Treachery, Manipulation, Grooming, Danger

Do we face these or avoid dealing with them?

Two images:

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On facing tough reality: "If they turn their backs to the fire, and get scorched in the rear, they'll find they have to sit on the blister." Abraham Lincoln

In Papua New Guinea I was for almost six years in charge of a boat that could carry 25 passengers.

The bow was higher off the ocean. The stern was only several feet above the waves. The New Guinean captain, Metegemeng was experienced with storms and high waves. Sometimes one is far from land and a storm hits. What does one do? Well, it is foolish to try and run away from the waves for they will come right over the top of the stern and flood the boat. The only way to deal with the situation is to turn the bow or front into the waves for the bow has been built to face these situations. Denial, kidding oneself, thinking there really is not a problem, believing one can avoid being hurt or damaged are all formulas for disaster.

Jesus faced into our three major human problems: Sin, Death, the power of Satan. That is what the cross is all about. A huge price to pay. But the end result. Resurrection, forgiveness, eternal life, Satan conquered.

In all life's tough challenges, we can turn into the waves with Jesus, claim the cross as our victory and find ourselves more than conquerors through him who loved us and is still there loving us.

Walter Wink quote