

Moms Raising Sons to Be Men

RHONDA STOPPE



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To my precious sons-in-law
Jacob Ebner and Estevan Atkinson

To my son Tony Hebert

And to my son Brandon Stoppe,
who continually encouraged me
as I wrote this book.

I am richly blessed to have watched
each of you become godly men
in this generation.

And to my girls
Meredith, Kayla, Kylene, and Jessy,
architects of the next generation.

Soli Deo Gloria

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Part One:

Life Lessons from Moms of the Bible

*The family was, and continues to be, my living definition
of both what God expects from me, and
what He wants for me.*

*I am thankful for this example, and I have no doubt
that it was God's plan for our lives to connect.*

—ANTHONY HEBERT

You Are Not Alone

On Mission with God

To be the mother of a son is not for the faint of heart. I remember when my son Brandon was born. Looking into his little face, the feelings within me were somehow different from four years earlier when I had given birth to my daughter. I felt so inadequate as I weighed the responsibility of molding this baby into a man. Up to this point, raising a girl had not been a difficult challenge. It was clear that she was like me, with all the love for being a girl that she could express. She loved shoes and colorful bows for her hair. She was extremely social and adored her friends. And her daddy? Oh, she loved her daddy. Yes, relating to her had been no problem at all.

Yet now in my arms I was holding a helpless baby boy who would grow into a man. Even the mere task of changing his diaper was intimidating with his recently circumcised appendage. I remember thinking, *I cannot imagine that soft little face one day having whiskers.* As I studied his hands so tiny and fragile, I thought of how they may one day be rough and calloused like his father's.

When you gave birth to your son, did you find yourself imagining what kind of man he might become? When it came to my son, I did not want to raise a momma's boy, yet I wanted to be his protector. I did not want him to be rough and reckless, but I did want him to be strong. I wanted him to become a wonderful, godly man like his father. After I took the little guy home and began to raise him, I found my

parenting overshadowed with a fear of doing it wrong. I gradually developed a sort of reactionary mode—he acted and I reacted. Rather than following a clear path toward shaping his life, the fear of what I did *not* want my son to be became my standard. I was merely putting out fires rather than kindling the flames of my son's character.

My husband and I had always wanted our home to be a place of peace, and yet I found in reality it had become a chaotic environment ruled by *my* emotions. Because I did not want to disappoint my husband, I did not let him know how much I was struggling. The day my daughter said to me, “I know you can't wait until we are grown up so that you can do whatever you want” was the day that I knew I needed to get some help. It broke my heart that I had given her that notion. I loved being a mother; it was what I *wanted* to do. Yet in my harried frustration, that was not at all the impression I had given my sweet little girl.

Feeling even more inadequate and alone, I began to read books about parenting, from which I compiled a sort of how-to list. I soon discovered that the list did not have the power to change me. It became a burdensome reminder of the standard I was unable to measure up to. I lacked fortitude for this new adventure. I knew that I needed to *become* a kind, courageous, and confident mother if I was ever going to raise kind, courageous, confident children. I desired to be a godly mother who raised godly children. But where would I find the direction I so desperately longed for?

I Need Help, Lord!

Reading books had given me some basic ground rules for this new playing field, but I also wanted to learn from real-life examples. My mother-in-law, who had raised two wonderful sons, had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and was no longer the vibrant help she had been when my daughter was born. The young mothers I knew seemed no more prepared for raising a son than I was. I had no idea how to ask God for what I needed. I felt alone and desperate for answers. I've since learned that one of God's favorite prayers is that of a simple cry for help flowing from a humble and desperate heart. I was both humbled and desperate as I uttered the plea, “I need help, Lord.”

God graciously answered my prayer by bringing several older, godly women into my life. I am now 50, and I have to laugh at how old they seemed to me when I was in my twenties. These women were not scholars or trained in child development. As mothers of sons, they had traveled down this path ahead of me. They had insights and understanding into what I was experiencing. Their lives had not been perfect or free from trials. They were genuine, precious, and vulnerable as they taught me what God had taught them. When I shared my struggles I did not feel judged; rather, I felt loved.

Titus 2:4 instructs older women to admonish younger women how to love their husbands and their children, and this group of women wholeheartedly obeyed that command. Of all the friendships I have had, the relationships that developed with these women have by far been the most pivotal in my life. They taught me not only how to parent, but how to *become* the mother God wanted me to become. In writing this book, my heart's desire is to be an older woman God can use to pour courage and confidence into you, just as those women did for me.

The Mission of Motherhood

One life-changing insight I received from these wonderful women was that I had been called by God to the mission of motherhood. And so have you. God has called you to join Him in the work He plans to do in your children. To become the instrument God will use to train your son somehow sheds glorious light on the unique ministry of motherhood, doesn't it? The Bible instructs God's servants to "take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it" (Colossians 4:17). There is no pass. No get-out-of-jail-free card. Your ministry came in the form of your son. How will you prepare yourself for that ministry? God never intended mothers to go it alone. Through His Word, He wants to equip you to train your children to love and trust Him.

As you follow God in molding the character of your son, you will undoubtedly face situations that are out of your control. It should come as no surprise that life is unpredictable. The Bible warns, "Do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as

though some strange thing happened to you” (1 Peter 3:12). When you face struggles, yielding your emotions to the roller coaster of circumstances will only add to the stress and result in chaos.

As you parent your children, if your focus is on every turn of events, you will certainly be overwhelmed and afraid. Fear and confusion will rob you of courage. By contrast, focusing on God and resting in His character will bring peace. Rather than subjecting your family to the gyrations of your emotional reactions, you can develop the habit of responding with an unwavering confidence in who God is. Knowing God intimately is a vital attribute of being a godly mother. How does one develop that kind of confidence in God? I looked to these older women for answers, and they directed me to the Bible.

When I spent time with these women, I observed their peaceful responses to the chaos of life. They displayed a resolve to seek after the Lord in every situation. They were not just church ladies who did good things for God; their hearts reflected His heart. They were by no means perfect, but they were genuine. Their lives had not been without trials and heartache; each had their own story of the struggles they had faithfully endured. In my estimation, the greatest measure of their parenting success was their sons’ genuine love for them *and* for the Lord.

The Crossroad

I found myself at a crossroad when the women encouraged me to attend their ladies’ Bible study. Honestly, my motivation was, “Free babysitting and two hours with grown-ups? I’m in!” Totally spiritual, right? During the first class session I was given a homework book. I thought, *Homework? No problem. I had gone to Christian schools; I can fill in the blanks without even having to look up the verses.* I know, my response was arrogant. *I was arrogant!* (God would reveal that to me later, but that is a topic for another chapter.)

When I got home and opened the book, I was blown away by how much work I had to do. This was not the typical fill-in-the-blank book. This was a Precept Ministries International Bible study¹ that assigned five hours of homework each week. Evidently my new friends were under the impression that I had time on my hands. There was no way

I could do that much homework! I concluded that these women had their children so long ago they had forgotten how much was needed to care for a baby. When I called my friend Gayle to explain I couldn't possibly keep up with the class, she kindly encouraged me to hang in there for just one semester. She offered to help me by babysitting, and promised that I would be forever changed by the experience. I reluctantly agreed to her offer because I did not want her to think I was not spiritual.

I kept the study book open on my kitchen table and worked on the assignments a little bit at a time. I studied while nursing, and in between changing diapers and folding laundry. Do you know what I found? For the first time in my life, I began to crave the Word of God. I looked forward to my few minutes of open time here and there to learn from Him. I began to be transformed by the renewing of my mind (Romans 12:2). My thinking was different. My parenting was different. Life's experiences were being filtered through God's truth, and that truth was changing who I was.

Even my husband, Steve, noticed the change. Fear was replaced with peace, anxiety with confidence. My propensity to people pleasing was overshadowed by a genuine desire to please God. I had given my heart to Christ when I was young, but had never before experienced this kind of longing to know Him. Up till now I had always viewed reading the Bible as a religious duty. But this was very different from duty. I was hungry for God and His Word. I was developing an unwavering resolve to seek God.

What about you—do you long to seek after God? Are you hungering after His Word, and eager to cultivate a deeper personal relationship with the One who created you, knows your heart better than anyone else, and provides for your every need?

Or perhaps as you're reading this you realize you've never taken that step to receive Christ as your Savior and Lord. Or maybe you're uncertain as to whether you are a Christian. If you would like to know more about how to give your heart to Christ and have an intimate relationship with Him, please see the appendix, "How to Have a Relationship with Jesus."

Resolve to Seek God

So what does this resolve look like—this hungering and thirsting after God? In the Bible I read a passage that spoke what my heart longed to express: “My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast” (Psalm 57:7). When I read that, I felt I had to know more about the person who penned that phrase! Those words were written by David amidst one of the greatest trials of his young life. Oh yes, I wanted to know more about this man David. What kind of woman had raised a son like this? I wanted to live how he lived, and even more, I wanted to raise my son to be like him.

David, while not without his faults, was devoted to seeking God. In Psalm 89:20, God proclaimed, “I have found My servant David...” Note that God said He found David. Elsewhere in Scripture we read that “the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him” (2 Chronicles 16:9). Can you picture that? The eyes of God moving all across the earth in search of individuals whose hearts are loyal to Him. Why? So that He can show Himself mighty on their behalf. Isn’t that exciting? You don’t have to do this mother thing alone. God stands ready to offer you His strength. He is more concerned about the man your son becomes than you are!

Learning to love God will make your heart loyal to Him. When I say this, I’m not talking about being a religious woman—that is, someone who merely goes through the motions of religious duty and rituals in the hopes that you can somehow earn God’s favor. No, I’m talking about genuine change that starts in the heart and draws upon God’s power and wisdom. I’m talking about a true inner love and passion for God and not mere external behavior that might look good to others but amounts to nothing more than hollow actions. The loyalty God seeks comes from the heart.

The Holy Spirit can use your loyal heart to draw your son to know and obey God. If your faith isn’t authentic, your son will know it, and that will likely turn him away from the things of God. It is only as you truly love God and surrender to His perfect will that you are enabled to live as an example to your son and make God attractive to him.

I Surrender All?

David was willing to do anything God asked of him. God said, “I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do *all* My will” (Acts 13:22). As David was growing up, he expressed his love for God in his psalms of worship. Out of that love grew trust. When David was just a young shepherd boy God allowed him to experience circumstances that would help to build that trust and to give him courage for the trials that he would face in the future.

In the course of guarding the family sheep, David had to do battle against a lion and a bear. When David faced those wild animals, he had choices to make—the same choices we have when we face a trial:

God’s plans for your son are greater than your plans.

- Run away in fear
- Question God’s goodness, and become bitter or angry
- Rely on the power of God to persevere and know victory

Relying on God’s strength, David chose to stay and fight. His conquest over the lion and the bear prepared him to later fight a God-blaspheming giant who had taunted the Israelite army (1 Samuel 17:36-37).

Does David’s kind of surrender of his life to God scare you? You can be honest with God; He already knows your thoughts. As a young mother, I had a deep-seated fear that if I surrendered my children to the Lord, He would test my loyalty by taking them from me. Have you ever struggled with such fears? The Bible can calm your heart as you learn that God is a loving and merciful Father. There is no reason to fear what God might do, for His love for your son is greater than any love you have. And His plans for your son are greater than your plans. What’s more, God has the power to accomplish those plans.

Practical Applications from David’s Mother

Have you ever asked yourself where David’s momma was while he was out there camping with the sheep and wrestling wild animals? Well, she wasn’t there fighting his battles for him. We can learn a lot from David’s mom.

She allowed her boy to become a man while he was still living at home.

David was her youngest son, yet she allowed him to leave the safety of home to do the dangerous work of a shepherd. She recognized David would find a sense of accomplishment in contributing to the family business. What kind of man might he have been if his mother's fears kept him tied to her apron strings? She seemed to know when to step back and allow him to face challenges without micromanaging his choices.

It can be frightening to loosen your grip on your son as he matures. All too often mothers coddle their sons in an attempt to protect them or make life easier for them, only to cripple their ability to manage themselves when they leave the safety of their homes. Making a conscious effort to allow and even orchestrate opportunities for your son to accomplish tasks away from your watchful eye will allow him to develop his courage and his ability to make decisions.

She had the courage to leave his safety in the hands of God. In those lonely hours spent on the hillsides, David learned how to be a man. God had used trials to develop his loyal heart. David's mother seemed to have resisted the temptation to rescue him at every turn. The Bible says, "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" (Proverbs 3:5-6). The Lord wants to be involved in your parenting decisions moment by moment. As you trust and acknowledge Him at each turn, He will make your path straight. If you rely on your own understanding and fight every battle for your son, how will he learn to rely on God's strength? Sometimes God will ask you to let your little boy battle that bear. Are you willing?

She respected her husband's wisdom. When David was a teenager His father, Jesse, sent him to the battlefield with food for his older brothers. You don't hear David's mother protesting, "Not my baby! He is too young to go."

Over the years there have been many times that my husband has given one of our boys a responsibility that I thought was too much for him. My initial instinct was to come to the boy's defense and explain why my husband was making a wrong decision. More often than not, I was the one in the wrong. I had to learn that my husband, who *was*

a man, had more discernment with regard to what our sons could and couldn't handle. (By the way, if your son does not have a father, do not despair; we will discuss that later in this book.)

David's mother raised a man after God's heart. Do you want to do the same with your son? What kind of mother might you be if you resolved to seek after God more diligently? How would your surrendered life affect your son's character development?

A Courageous Mother

Moses is another man who was used greatly by God. Who was his mother? Jochebed found herself in a troubled time in Israel's history. The descendants of Jacob had become slaves in Egypt. The slaves grew so great in number that the Egyptians became fearful. So Pharaoh sent out a proclamation that the Hebrew midwives should kill every baby boy born to the Hebrew women.

At the risk of losing their own lives, two courageous midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, refused to murder the babies. Eventually the frustrated Pharaoh decreed that all the Egyptians throw newborn Hebrew boys into the river, but keep the daughters alive (Exodus 1:15-17).

A Difficult Dilemma

When Jochebed and her husband, Amram, gave birth to Moses, they did their best to hide their lovely son for as long as they could. By the time Moses was three months old, however, it would have been a matter of time before someone found and killed him. Something had to be done, or surely he would end up dying (Exodus 1:15-2:10; Hebrews 11:23).

I can only imagine the ache in Jochebed's heart as she carefully wrapped her precious baby boy in her favorite blanket. As tears streamed down her face, would she have attempted a brave smile into his little face? As if to somehow give him the courage she may desperately have needed for herself?

As Jochebed prepared to place Moses in a basket upon the Nile River, her daughter, who was standing nearby, would likely have questioned the rationale of her mother's plan. "You're gonna put him in that

basket, Mother? Will it float? What if water leaks in? What about the snakes and crocodiles?” Surely Jochebed had already asked herself these questions as well. Could this *really* be Jehovah’s answer to her prayer to save her son? She must have been confident her idea was from the Lord to even attempt the plan. And yet, would she end up wavering in her conviction as she prepared to send her son afloat on the Nile River?

Try to put yourself in Jochebed’s sandals. I don’t know about you, but three months after my son was born I was still a hormonal, emotional mess! Trying to cope with hiding my newborn from people who wanted to kill him—coupled with the anxiety of trying to silence him each time he cried—would have sent me over the edge!

A Complete Trust in God

I am in awe of Jochebed’s composure here. Rather than ranting and raving to Amram about their difficult situation, which I am ashamed to say would have been my default mode, she carefully built a little ark for her son. Instead of running to each of her girlfriends for advice, she quietly acted on the plan that God had put in her heart. Can you just hear how her friends might have responded if she had solicited their advice? First you have the nay-sayers: “Jochebed, that is a crazy plan. The baby will surely drown, and if not drown, he will get eaten by crocodiles. Wouldn’t you prefer to know for certain what happens to him?” Then there would have been the hopeless: “Your plan will never work, Jochebed. Just give up. God doesn’t care about your baby. He didn’t care about mine when the soldiers came and killed him. Why are you any different? If the soldiers catch you with that baby, surely you will be put to death. What will become of your other children? You have a responsibility to them.”

Although advice is often practical, sometimes our friends can *practical* us right into disobeying the Lord. Have you ever experienced the Lord impressing upon you to do something that others have questioned? I have, and in such times, it can be confusing to discern what the right path is.

How puzzled the people in Jochebed’s generation must have been.

God had called Israel His chosen people, yet He allowed them to suffer greatly. How is it possible to place your trust in God when your circumstances appear to be wildly out of His control? But we know there were some people who still trusted God. Among them were the midwives who, at great risk, chose to protect the Hebrew babies. Where did they find the courage to disobey Pharaoh's decree? And where did Jochebed find the strength to *do* something about her circumstances?

If you were in this terrible scenario, how do you think you would have responded? My natural tendency would likely have been to pull blankets over my head and wait for things to get better. How could Jochebed ever have brought herself to let go of the little basket? Do you think you could have sent your baby boy down the Nile River? Imagine watching him float out of your secure hands into the unknown. Where would a mother find the courage to do such a thing?

A Miraculous Intervention from God

As Jochebed watched her baby float away, she demonstrated courage that was not found in her ability to preserve the life of her young son. Her decision that day required she follow a plan that had no answers. Yet she sent the baby *away* from her protection and into the care of her God. That kind of courage comes only in the life of one who has developed a genuine trust in God. Jochebed's confidence in the Lord was evident in her actions.

If Jochebed had tightened her grip on baby Moses and attempted to continue hiding him, she would not have experienced what happened next. Her trusting obedience was rewarded with nothing short of a miracle. When the daughter of Pharaoh drew the little Hebrew baby from the basket floating on the Nile, the Lord moved her heart to compassion. Not only did the Egyptian princess proclaim she would adopt Moses as her son; she sent his very own sister—who happened to be nearby—to find a nursemaid for the baby. And of course, Moses' sister pointed Pharaoh's daughter to Moses' own mother! God blessed Jochebed's obedience by making her Moses' nursemaid.

Making the Most of a Brief Opportunity

During the few years Jochebed was permitted to nurse her son, she would have had a profound influence upon him. Surely Jochebed would have told little Moses stories of the faithfulness of the God of Israel. Knowing their time together would not be long, Jochebed would likely have had a sense of urgency to teach Moses to love her God. We mothers would do well to remind ourselves that the time we have to influence our children is short, and we are to begin developing their love for God in their earliest years.

Never underestimate the amount of influence you can have on your son in his first years of life. In her book *Six Ways to Keep the "Good" in Your Boy*, Dannah Gresh states, "In 2005, the findings of a new study released in *Pediatrics* found that parent-infant connection—intentional togetherness—plays a key role in shaping the right side of an infant's brain during the first year of life."² Noted neuroscientist Allan Schore says, "The brain of an infant...is not just shaped by genetics but also by experience in the last trimester of pregnancy through the child's first year and a half of life...A parent or other caregiver can provide this early attachment, but large day-care situations may be less ideal."³

Do not be naive and assume that dropping your child off at an impersonal day-care facility every day won't leave an imprint upon him. If you *must* work, it is essential that the person caring for your child loves your God and will emulate that love to your son. Though Jochebed had a very short time to influence Moses, the impression she made was strong enough that it stayed with him even when he grew older and lived in Pharaoh's palace. Her teachings were likely the foundation God used to build Moses' faith. And sure enough, when Moses grew older, he chose to suffer with his people rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season in the palaces of Egypt (Hebrews 11:24-25).

The Bible does not say much about Jochebed and her character qualities. Her name, in Hebrew, means "Jehovah glorified." *Glorified*, as used here, means "to make weighty, to make glorious." Jochebed's actions certainly lived up to her name. In her decision to trust Jehovah, His name was made glorious.

The Influence of a Few Years

The Lord did not bring our oldest boy, Tony, into our lives until he was 15 years old. For years our family has attempted to find a way to illustrate to people, in a clear way, how Tony became our son. About a year ago Tony, now in his thirties, called me, excited about a movie he had watched. He said, “I know I am not a big black football player like the guy in the movie, but what I saw reminds me so much of our family. And the mom in the movie reminds me of you!” I had seen the very popular movie only days before. I had cried while watching it because it brought back memories of when Tony first came to live with us. He lived in our home for only a short time, but just as the Lord had used Jochebed’s few years with Moses to shape him for life, God gave us a brief window of opportunity to give Tony a strong foundation for life.

Tony had already bonded with Steve even before he had moved in with us. Steve was his youth pastor, and right from the beginning they enjoyed a wonderful relationship. When Tony graduated from high school, he gave “Big Steve,” as he called him, a card saying thank-you for becoming his dad. It was a touching note that Steve still keeps with his most treasured possessions. We kind of look at that card as Tony’s “official adoption papers.”

During Tony’s short time with us, he and I had great talks about his new life as a believer, and about girls. We talked about his dream to become a fighter pilot, about God’s character, and about girls. We discussed God’s plan for marriage...and did I mention we talked about girls? While Tony and I got along well, he related to me with love and respect, but never as his momma. I wanted to be a mom to him, but I respected that he had a mother whom he loved, and that he didn’t necessarily need another.

Upon graduating from high school, Tony was accepted to Texas A&M University. It was difficult for our family to say good-bye to him, but we were excited about the opportunities before him. I determined that my new role in his life would be as a prayer supporter.

Right away Tony, our overachiever, went out for the drill team, a much-sought-after and competitive position. The requirements were

grueling. All the while, he was taking a full load of classes. By September, Tony had been selected for the team and he was thrilled—thrilled and exhausted.

One day Tony called home. In a weak and shaky voice, he said he had a severe case of pneumonia and would need to take a break from all activities. He told me he was not going to tell his drill commander he was sick for fear of losing his place on the drill team. Oh my sweet boy, who had worked so hard to achieve his goals! He had been such a man and accomplished great things. Now all I could hear was a little boy who needed a mother.

I asked the Lord for discernment. As I said earlier, we as mothers need to learn when God wants us to step back and allow our young men to battle their trials alone. But somehow I sensed this was different. Tony had worked so hard to land a spot on the team, and now he was terribly sick. I felt that the least I could do was *ask* Tony if I could make a phone call on his behalf. Reluctantly, he agreed.

I called a friend of Tony's who was an alumnus of the school. He promised to make some calls. Soon I heard back from the drill team's commandant, who called to assure me that Tony's place on the team was secure. With that taken care of, we brought our very sick boy home and I took care of him until he got better. Through that experience, God knit our hearts together, and I became a *momma* to Tony.

Tony went on to graduate from college and became a fighter pilot. While he has achieved many amazing goals, I was never more proud of him than on the day he called to say, "You know, I am living my dream, and I now realize that it is not enough. My Sunday school teacher, a retired fighter pilot, told me that if I am doing all of this but I'm not surrendered to Christ, my life will be wasted."

When asked how being a part of our family influenced him, Tony said, "The family was, and continues to be, my living definition of both what God expects from me, and what He wants for me. I am thankful for this example, and I have no doubt that it was God's plan for our lives to connect."

Only God Knows

Jochebed had no idea she was being used by the Lord to train a child who would one day become the deliverer of Israel. When David's mother sent her young son to the battlefield, how could she have known God had been preparing him to slay a giant? And would she have ever dreamed that her gentle warrior would one day be the king of Israel, as well as a man after God's own heart?

I say all that to bring up this very important point: The first teachers of these godly leaders were not theologians; they were mothers. And you are your son's first teacher about God as well. You share the same role God entrusted to Moses' and David's mothers.

Generation after generation, the mission of motherhood has been the same. God invites mothers to join Him in molding the character of their sons. Will you partner with God in teaching your son how to love Him? The Word of God is your textbook. Will you determine to prepare yourself for this ministry? The Lord is searching for hearts that are loyal to Him. The same One who called the mothers of Jochebed and David is calling you. Only God knows the future that awaits your son. What an amazing honor He has given you. *You* are the vessel that the Lord will use to prepare your son for a lifetime of use by Him.



Rhonda with Brandon (left) and Tony (right).

Thinking It Through

1. Which mother in this chapter do you identify with most? Why?

2. Have you ever considered motherhood as a ministry? What steps will you start taking now to equip yourself to fulfill this ministry?

Living It Out

Write out and memorize Psalm 57:7. Will you resolve to have a heart that is steadfast toward God? Write a prayer of commitment below.