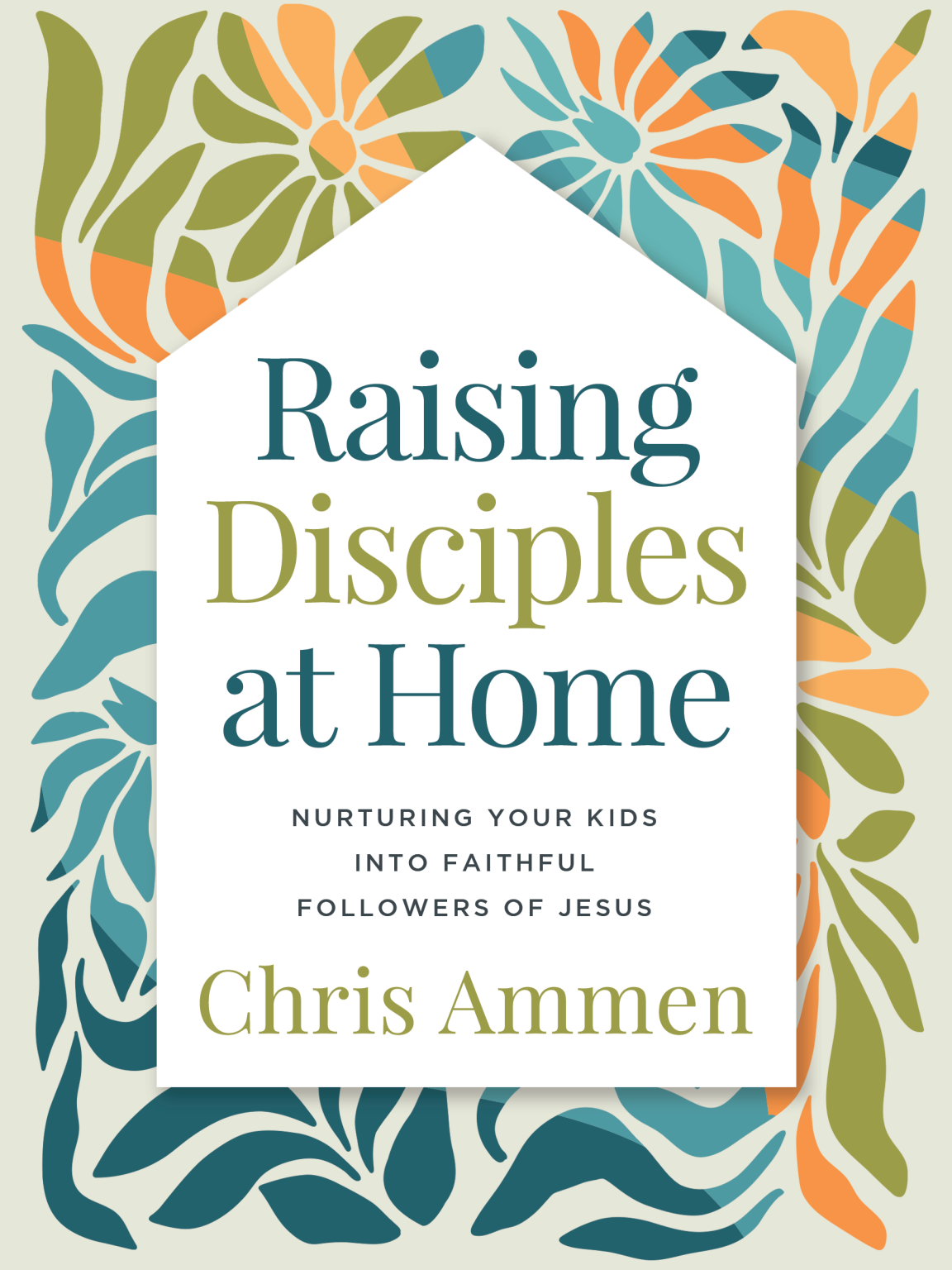
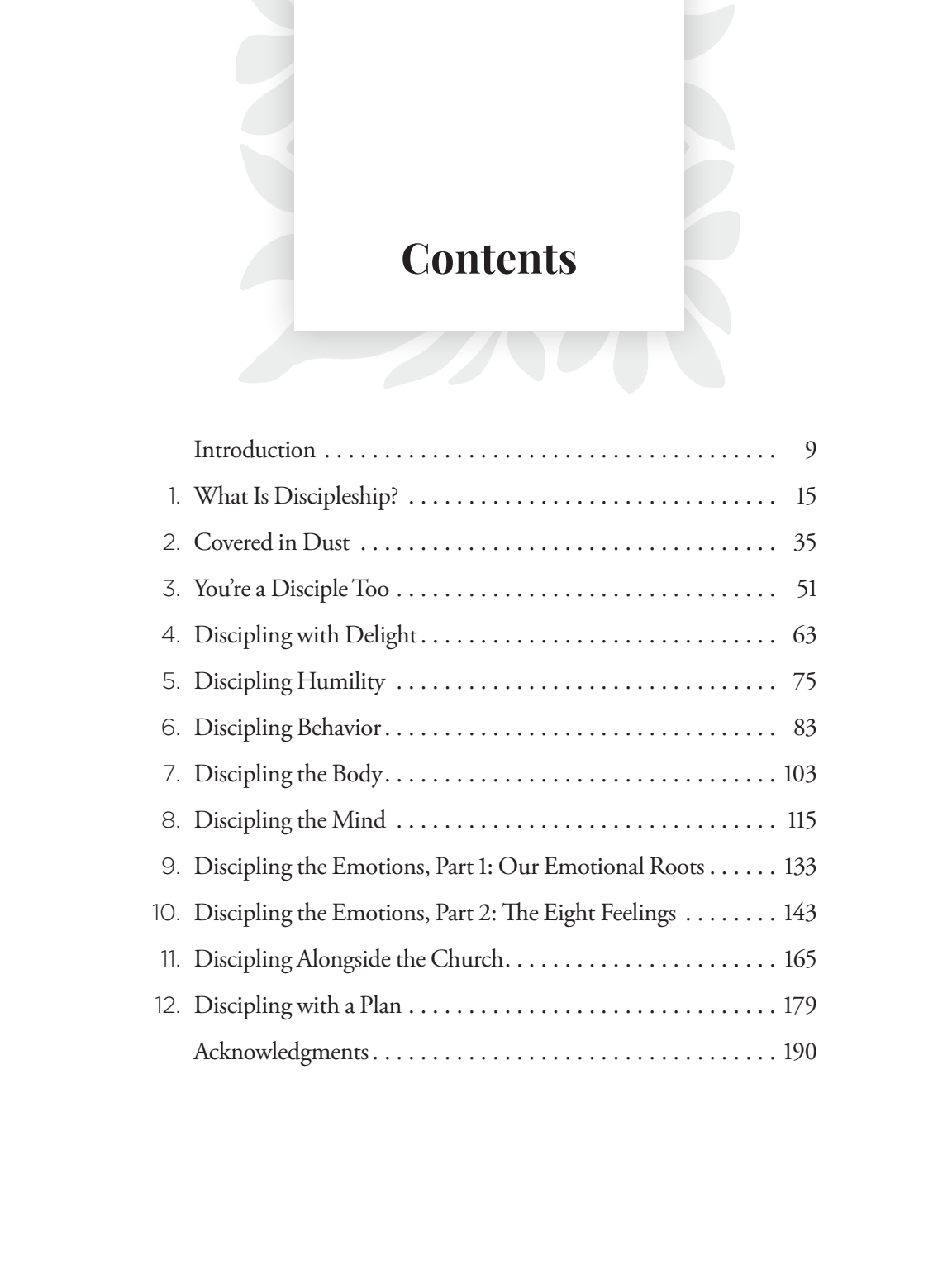




Raising Disciples at Home

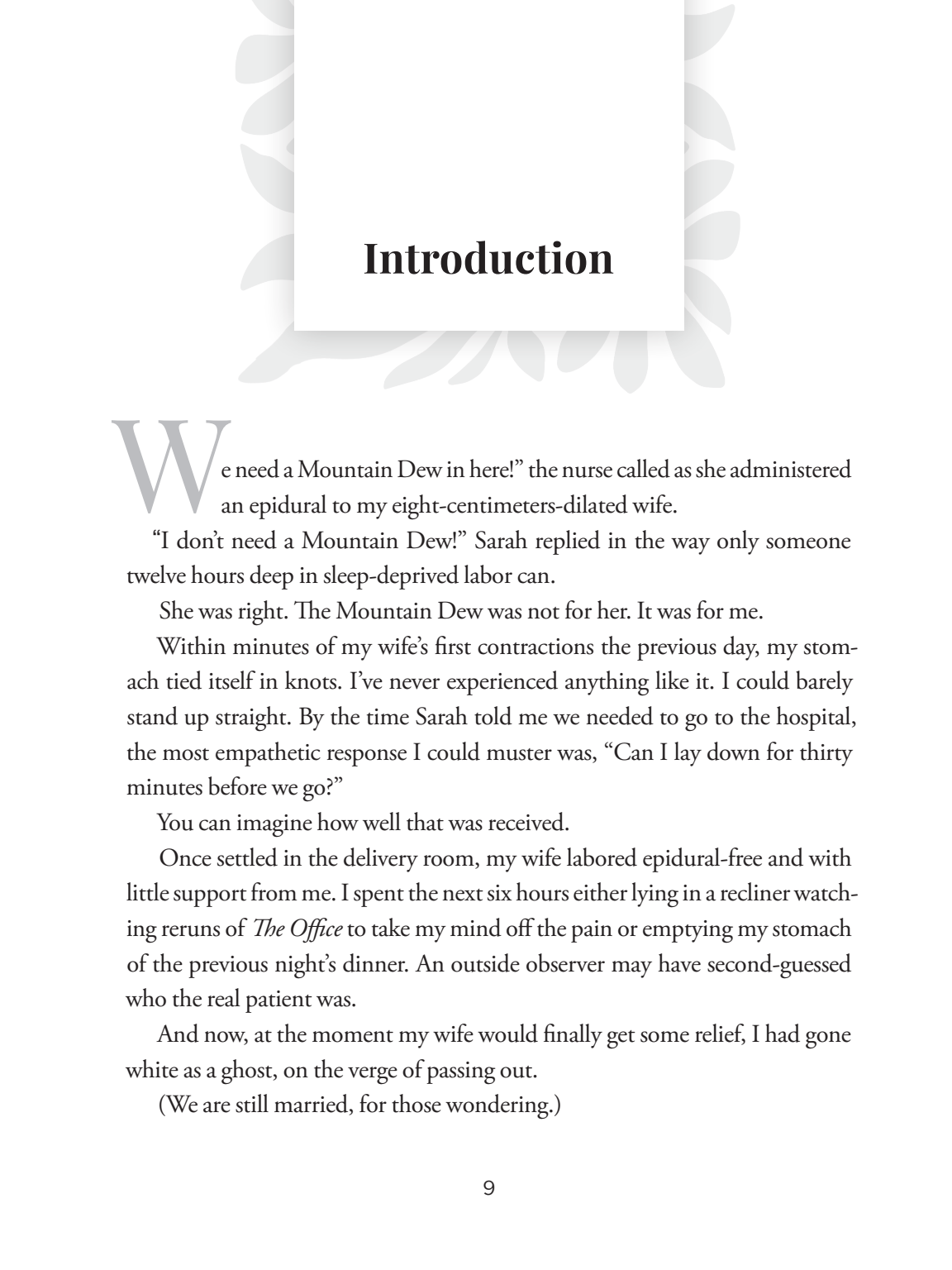
NURTURING YOUR KIDS
INTO FAITHFUL
FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

Chris Ammen



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Introduction

We need a Mountain Dew in here!” the nurse called as she administered an epidural to my eight-centimeters-dilated wife.

“I don’t need a Mountain Dew!” Sarah replied in the way only someone twelve hours deep in sleep-deprived labor can.

She was right. The Mountain Dew was not for her. It was for me.

Within minutes of my wife’s first contractions the previous day, my stomach tied itself in knots. I’ve never experienced anything like it. I could barely stand up straight. By the time Sarah told me we needed to go to the hospital, the most empathetic response I could muster was, “Can I lay down for thirty minutes before we go?”

You can imagine how well that was received.

Once settled in the delivery room, my wife labored epidural-free and with little support from me. I spent the next six hours either lying in a recliner watching reruns of *The Office* to take my mind off the pain or emptying my stomach of the previous night’s dinner. An outside observer may have second-guessed who the real patient was.

And now, at the moment my wife would finally get some relief, I had gone white as a ghost, on the verge of passing out.

(We are still married, for those wondering.)

What I now know is that I didn't have food poisoning, a stomach bug, or the flu. Instead, I was experiencing the first of what has become an eleven-year battle with panic attacks. Something in my body knew the birth of our first child was a big deal. Life as I knew it was about to change. I couldn't control it. I couldn't run away from it. Another human would soon depend on me for life. I wasn't exactly sure I was ready. I'm still not. We have four kids now.

Raising kids is a terrifying prospect. Don't listen to anyone who tells you it's easy. It's not. Nobody has this parenting thing figured out. As I loaded our child in the car a few days after my Mountain Dew experience, I had the unmistakable feeling that I was stealing him from the hospital. He really belonged to the nurses, and we would bring him back in a few hours. He was just a loaner baby. Nobody would actually trust me with a real live person. But there he was, day after day, growing up in our home.

Now, here's the thing nobody tells you at baby showers: The first year is all the easy stuff. If you are in the first year as you read this, I know it does not feel that way. You are physically exhausted and can no longer use the bathroom in peace and quiet. Take whatever comfort you can from this...it only gets harder.

One day soon, your child will have words and opinions. Your cute, saggy-diapered beauty queen will confront you about your sin. Your precious little boy will become an entitled troublemaker. You can't stop it. It's like one of the laws of nature or something.

And yet, God has asked you (*yes, you*) to lead your children to Jesus. This is what I'll refer to in this book as *discipleship*. This word may be familiar to you. If it is, you likely attach it to the concept of teaching your children about sin, repentance, and salvation. You may exclusively see discipleship as a church or parachurch activity like Sunday school or small groups. While these are part of discipleship, those ideas, activities, and strategies don't present a complete picture of the role that God and parents play in a child's spiritual formation.

As much as you may try to do all the right things, there is a limit to your influence as a parent. If you are new to parenting, allow me to pull the curtain back on how discipleship will go for you. You will do your best to train your children in the way they should go, and everything in their bodies and hearts will resist that training. You will make a great plan, you will execute it to perfection, and even still, your son or daughter will intentionally try to break you.

Before you close this book and return it to wherever you bought it from, please understand that this is the most loving thing I can possibly think to tell you. Your child will not cooperate with your discipleship. You are not ready for the task of raising disciples. You never will be. And *that* is the very best news you can hear.

In a world of gurus and advice columns, certainly there should be a manual for how to raise God-honoring children. Maybe you even picked up this book thinking it was like *Discipleship for Dummies*. It's not.

There is no formula, no curriculum, no reading plan, and no catechism that will make your kids into faithful followers of Jesus. That's not the way it works.

In fact, the Bible itself provides very little direct instruction on the mechanics of discipleship. We've already hinted at a few places it does, but let's look further: "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

"*Train* them?" Thanks, King Solomon. Got it. Care to elaborate?

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:7-9).

Thank you, Moses. Teach. Talk. Write. Is that all you have for us? Bind them

on my hand? Write them on my gates? I'm pretty sure the HOA will take issue with that.

The New Testament gives us a little more to go on. Luke 2 is a remarkable scene of a twelve-year-old Jesus learning from elders in Jerusalem. However, we have no record of Jesus's parents, Mary or Joseph, teaching him anything.

In 2 Timothy 1, Paul indicates that Timothy likely learned the faith from his mother and grandmother, but any discussion of how they passed it on is notably absent.

At this point, all my type A friends have simultaneously gone into mental paralysis. I know this drives you crazy. You want a concrete action plan, and yet the Bible won't give it to you.

But what I'm going to invite you to see in this book is that this lack of a plan is a gift. In fact, if the good news of the gospel is indeed good news, there are at least three freedoms we should experience as we disciple our children. We will circle back to each of these multiple times throughout this book.

Freedom #1: You are far less important than you think you are. God never puts you, the parent, at the center of your child's salvation. Hear that again—you are not the lynchpin of your child's journey of discipleship. *God is.* In the best of scenarios, you are merely able to encourage what God is already doing in your child's life. In most cases, we might say, the best parents can do is to lead their children to the places God has promised to work and then get out of the way. As much as you want your children to know God, he is infinitely more invested in knowing them.

Freedom #2: You can make mistakes. Adam Grant, in his book *Hidden Potential: The Science of Achieving Greater Things*, writes that perfectionists get three things wrong: they obsess about silly and insignificant details, they avoid taking risks, and they don't learn from their mistakes.¹ The good news of the

1. Adam Grant, *Hidden Potential: The Science of Achieving Greater Things* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2023), 67.

kingdom of God is that we are free to try and fail, to try and learn, and to try and occasionally get it right. Even the best of parents, according to therapist Dan Allender, only “get it right” 50 percent of the time.

Freedom #3: You are far more important than you think you are. *Come again?* Doesn't that debunk Freedom #1? Not in the slightest. God's ordinary means of working in our lives is through the encouragement, generosity, and kindness of other people. It is no accident that you are your child's parent. You are the person for the job! God wants to work through you to bless your child. The freedom of this truth comes in the openhanded confession of “God, I do not know how to do this. I need you to show me.”

On December 6, 2012, I desperately needed to hear these truths. Instead, I got a Mountain Dew. I want better for you. I want you to know the delight God takes in you as a person, see the beautiful ways he is at work in your children, and find the courage to come alongside them in the helpful ways God has appointed for you.

Now, let me couch everything I'm about to say in the rest of this book. I am a pastor, not a professional theologian. I am practical before I am theoretical. Those looking for the precision of a young whippersnapper fresh out of seminary may be disappointed. Instead, this book is a set of musings from a fellow parent about topics I have found helpful, even essential, when it comes to raising disciples in your home.

Maybe I'm a lot like you. Just a man in his early forties going through a midlife crisis, taking stock of his life, and seeing that he may have something of relative value to offer the world. I'm glad you're here. Maybe you'll find in this book a helpful conversation partner. Perhaps it will make you feel less alone in your journey.

Maybe you are like me fifteen years ago, starry-eyed at the prospect of raising children. The worst your children have done to you so far is pee in your face

or run out in the street. They haven't yet looked you square in the eye and said, "I hate you!" and slammed the door in your face. Don't worry, it will happen to you too. Nobody faults you for your lack of humiliation. I'm glad you're here. This is the type of book I wish I had read in the "urine in my face" stage.

Maybe you are twenty-five years older than me. Most of life is in the rear-view, and you may even have grandchildren of your own. Maybe you look back with regret on the ways you raised your children. Maybe you have fond memories and wish you could relive the "glory days." Perhaps some of the ideas in this book are ones you've never considered. Remember this—your last lap of the race might be your best lap. Your adult children and grandchildren still need you, just in different ways. I hope you are a part of a church with young families who desperately need your leadership. You may be on your last lap, and it is probably your most important.

Whatever your station in life, I hope you walk away from this book closer to Jesus. Whether you pick up any tips, tricks, or strategies is secondary. What your children need from you is a compelling example of what it means to follow Jesus. The only way for you to be that for your children is to draw near to him daily.

CHAPTER 1

What Is Discipleship?

The step into the situation where faith is possible is not an offer which we can make to Jesus, but always his gracious offer to us.

—DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

I wasn't sure why we kept going to random people's homes, but we did. Sometimes on short notice. We didn't even really know them all that well. I was told to play in close proximity to their children for an hour or so. "Y'all are too far apart; can you play closer together? Try breathing on one another. If you see someone put a toy in their mouth, do your best to lick it as many times as possible. That's right—the more, the better."

These scenarios no longer exist with the advent of modern vaccines, but in the 1980s, they were all the rage. Pox parties. One family's children got the chicken pox, so the whole neighborhood rushed to their house to get their kids infected. The goal was to get the chicken pox as young as possible because then you would have immunity to it and your case was less likely to be severe.

The aim of these parties was not too dissimilar to the goal of discipleship. As Christian parents, we want to raise our children to love Jesus. And so we put them in the places where God is already at work, much like my mother put us in the places where we were likely to catch what we now know is an extremely dangerous virus. Thanks, Mom.

If you are a Christian parent, I know you want your children to walk with Jesus. You want them to love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. If you hold these desires, however, you will face some of the most challenging headwinds the people of God have known for quite some time. Our culture is set on cultivating the values of autonomy, power, independence, gender fluidity, wealth, and sexual freedom. However, as external pressures have increased, many churches have become distracted. Functionally, some church leaders appear more concerned with live streams and stage design than the basic task of discipleship. Publishing houses, for their part, produce new and exciting resources as fast as they can, but it doesn't seem to move the needle of families drifting from the faith. The paradox is bewildering: Despite living in a time with more robust discipleship resources than any other time in human history, actual disciple-making is at an all-time low.

To make matters worse, among the deficiencies of the modern church are its understanding and practice of child discipleship. In our attempts to make things better, many church leaders have felt the solution is to provide neat and tidy definitions of discipleship and statistics we can measure and report back to the congregation. As a children's pastor, I have felt pressure over the years—both from other staff members and parents—to crystallize and quantify exactly what discipleship is. Rarely does it dawn on us that our need for precision and clarity around questions about discipleship is far more of a Western value than a biblical one.

In the modern West, we love definitions. If we can define it, we believe we

can understand it, and if we understand it, we think we can control it. But that was not the world Jesus grew up in. Eastern cultures embrace mystery and uncertainty far more readily. Western versions of discipleship are often culturally appropriated expressions of what Jesus and his disciples experienced. This appropriation is not necessarily wrong, but it is worth our reflection so we can gain a deeper appreciation of what it means to be a disciple.

Take these definitions of discipleship, summarized from a random sampling of other parents on social media and within my local church context:

Discipleship is...

- ...teaching our children about God.
- ...having a relationship with God.
- ...going to church.
- ...growing in compassion for others.
- ...participating in a small group and/or Sunday school.
- ...learning to apply God's teaching to our lives.
- ...growing in the fruit of the Spirit.
- ...regularly reading your Bible and praying.
- ...building relationships with other Christians.
- ...loving God and loving your neighbor.

All these statements are true. They are all parts of discipleship. Our children ought to grow in love for God's word and prayer. They should build relationships with others. All these things are great, but our best appropriations of discipleship are only a fraction of the whole. It would be like asking you, "How do I throw a dinner party?" and you replying, "You put out silverware." True statement, but if you never send invitations, plan for, shop for, and prepare a meal—not to mention tidying your home to an artificial level of cleanliness—then you don't truly have a dinner party.

The same is true of discipleship. It's well past time for Christian parents to

awaken to discipleship as Jesus knew it—the formation not simply of the mind or the will but of the whole person. We are complex creatures with motivations, experiences, deficiencies, passions, memories, liabilities, traumas, desires, talents, histories, and futures. Discipleship is nothing less than God molding and shaping the entirety of our personhood into his image as those who delight in him and bring him glory.

Did you catch that? Discipleship is primarily the activity of God, not the responsibility of man. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The step into the situation where faith is possible is not an offer which we can make to Jesus, but always his gracious offer to us.”¹ Discipleship is the miraculous work God accomplishes through the work of the Holy Spirit. This is a fundamental yet profound paradigm shift.

You Are Not the Only Discipler of Your Children

As a children’s pastor, I’ve known many parents who feel unqualified to be a disciple of Jesus, let alone disciple their own children. It’s a shame. When I let myself think about it long enough, it saddens me. Well-intentioned churches all over the world tell parents a great lie, “You are the most important discipler of your children.” When parents don’t listen, they simply say it louder, more creatively, and more often. I used to tell the parents in my church this. No matter how many times I said it, and no matter how eloquently I communicated, these words didn’t make them better parents. They didn’t motivate them to be better disciple-makers. My words only made them feel more guilty.

To those parents, I am sorry. The primary burden of discipleship does not fall on your shoulders. Here’s what I mean...

The call for parents to be the primary discipler of their children is typically drawn from one passage in Deuteronomy 6:

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Touchstone, 1995), 85.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (verses 4-9).

Certainly, in the modern Western world, a parent's influence cannot be understated. The home, by virtue of time spent, is typically the primary place of spiritual formation for children. This investment of parents is good and commendable, but it is only a tangential application of Deuteronomy 6.

Notice who Deuteronomy 6 is addressed to: "Hear, O Israel." This was a corporate address so important it is repeated nearly word for word in Deuteronomy 11. These passages were written to the community of God's people: children, unmarried people, widows, parents, priests—the audience is everyone. The *yous* in this passage are misleading when translated into English, where the word is typically understood in the singular. Instead, the *yous* in the context of Deuteronomy 6 are more like *y'all*: "Y'all shall teach them diligently to your children."

In the cultural context of Deuteronomy 6, the act of raising, teaching, and training children was far more communal than it is today. Most often, generations of families lived together. Nobody lived on half-acre lots. Homes were clustered tightly together without windows and doors. Gathering food was a shared responsibility. Clean water was derived from a common source. You relied on others not simply for companionship but for survival. Communities depended on one another for everything, including the discipleship of children.

Today, we live in an entirely different world. It's nearly impossible to translate the experience of an ancient Near Eastern family to a modern American

family. Just think of all the things that separate us now: privately-owned transportation, air-conditioned homes, work-from-home arrangements, indoor plumbing, and not just grocery stores...but grocery delivery.

Even technology—for as much as it connects us, also separates us. We keep people at arm's length by texting them instead of calling or even knocking on their door to ask a question. I can still remember the days when someone showing up at your door unannounced wasn't considered rude. It was just normal. Not anymore! Just yesterday, I texted my next-door neighbor before going over to ask to borrow butter, and we're actually really good friends.

Modernization has privatized nearly every aspect of life. And so it should come as no surprise that we've done much the same with discipleship. The modern assumption is that children are the property of their parents. The biblical assumption is that children belong first to God and then to the covenant community of God, of which their parents play an important but not isolated role. For instance, when Jesus was twelve, his parents accidentally left him behind in Jerusalem and didn't even realize he wasn't with them until they had traveled an entire day. Mary and Joseph simply supposed he was somewhere among the community of people traveling together.² Today, my wife and I don't pull out of the driveway until we do at least three head counts to make sure we actually have all four children.

Privatized discipleship minimizes the role of the church. It decouples children from the unique contributions of the community—teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and friends. Biblical discipleship invites parents to keep a looser grip on our children while inviting other influential voices into their lives. We should avoid the error of romanticizing ancient Near Eastern culture. They had plenty of problems too. One thing is for certain, though—parents were not expected to be and do everything for their children.

2. Luke 2:44.

Deuteronomy 6 goes on to explain the purpose of “teaching our children diligently”:

- “Take care lest you forget the LORD” (verse 12).
- “It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear” (verse 13).
- “You shall diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God” (verse 17).
- “You shall do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD” (verse 18).

The goal of all this teaching is so our children will know, remember, follow, and learn from God.

Parents, the primary role of discipleship belongs first and foremost to God. Believe it or not, he is more invested in your children than you are. He knew them, made them, and called them his own before you knew what their chubby cheeks looked like.³ He knows everything about your child and works and wills for their good and his glory.⁴ He alone began a good work in them and will bring it to completion.⁵ Only from this posture of humility can we truly come alongside and trust the work God is already doing in our children. When we trust, we can stop trying to control outcomes and dictate timelines. When we trust, we decouple our self-worth from our children’s spiritual development. It’s not up to us. It’s no longer a reflection on our “good” or “bad” parenting. The reality of the living God choosing to draw near to our children is a miracle no one can fathom and certainly no one can control.

3. Ephesians 1:4.

4. Philippians 2:13.

5. Philippians 1:6.

The Example of Paul and Timothy

The apostle Paul wrote two letters to a man named Timothy, whom he called his “beloved child.” Timothy was not literally Paul’s son, but he was as close to him as a son (they must have read Deuteronomy 6). Paul tells him in 2 Timothy 3,

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (verses 14-19).

Paul could have written a lot of things here, but he chose to highlight the work of God. The most important tool Timothy brought with him from childhood was being “acquainted with the sacred writings.” What Timothy possessed in his knowledge of Scripture was nothing less than God himself because it is through the Scriptures that God has revealed himself to his children. The word of God is what taught, reproofed, corrected, and trained Timothy. In other words, we might say that Timothy was discipled by God.

After God, the responsibility of discipleship belongs to the covenant community of believers known as the church, of which you, as your child’s parent, play perhaps the most influential role. However, Paul knew that Timothy’s momma was only part of the equation.

Paul reminds Timothy of the spiritual influences in his life: his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice.⁶ Throughout 2 Timothy, Paul also recalls Timothy’s other spiritual influences: himself, the household of Onesiphorus, and

6. 2 Timothy 1:5.

Prisca and Aquila, among others.⁷ Timothy's mother is mentioned, but only alongside the good work of the covenant community of Lystra.

To some, it may feel like I'm overanalyzing discipleship or trying to ruffle feathers by being novel. I can assure you that neither of these is the case. Instead, I want to help families return to a place of sanity—a place where parents know the good limits of their power, influence, and capacities. From this place of humility we can ask for help and trust our church community to be for our children what we cannot be for them, and we can ask God to do what only he can do.

We can rest assured that God cares far more about our children than we do. Just look at the robust work of the Trinity in the work of disciple-making: The Father elects to save your children.⁸ The Son willingly offers himself as the Savior and Mediator to redeem your children from the punishment of sin.⁹ The Holy Spirit provides Christ with the gifts necessary to accomplish his saving work and also applies the benefits of Christ's work (regeneration, justification, sanctification, glorification, and so on) to those whom the Father gives to the Son.¹⁰

Parents, you can do none of those things. Yes, you love your children. Yes, you want them to know Jesus. But you are limited in ways God is not. Do not let your need for control allow your children to experience more of your liabilities than they do of God's grace.

Your job, as we will see in a moment, is simply to put your children in the places God has promised to work, where they can sit at his feet, walk with him, and learn from him. Then, you can step back, watch, pray, and marvel at the work God does in your child. This role is God's gracious news that you are merely a limited human with finite power. But, it is also a welcome for you to

7. 2 Timothy 1:13, 16; 4:19.

8. Ephesians 1:4.

9. Luke 22:29; Hebrews 10:5–7.

10. Luke 1:35; 3:21–22; 4:18; John 6:38–39; 17:4.

join in the process in the ways you are uniquely able to contribute. Between the balance of limitation and engagement, we find humility.

Humble parents know this: God does not need you. He may choose to work through you, but he also might work in spite of you. This posture is the antidote for the feeling of not feeling qualified. Of course you are not qualified! There was never any qualification process to begin with.

The fact that God does not need you but invites you into the process of discipleship is not him keeping you at arm's length. Instead, it's God's loving protection for you. Your heart is not made to handle the weight of the burden of discipleship. Trusting God with our kids' discipleship keeps us from pride when things work out well and crushing despair when things don't.

From the unique place you occupy as your child's parent, there are two key responsibilities that are uniquely yours: Put them where God has promised to work, and prepare them for eternity.

1. Put your children in the places where God has already promised to work.

From the beginning, God has ordained a few things as essential to the life of his followers: the word of God, prayer, and the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism. We call these the "ordinary means of grace" because God has promised to work through these ordinary things to bring salvation. Where are these things found? In the church.

You may have been hurt by the church. You may have hurt the church as well. Let this direct statement do nothing to minimize the pain you may carry with you: Your children need to be a part of a gospel-rich church. Your children need to sit under the preached word of God week in and week out simply because this is how God has planned to bring salvation to his people.

Let me go a step further. Your children need to go to a church that meets in-person. Virtual church was an emergency solution most churches transitioned

to during COVID. However, that emergency solution became too many people's default.¹¹ Only adding to this problem is our desire to "make up for lost time." Having been deprived for the better part of two years, we have now crammed our family schedules full of sports, extracurriculars, and trips. We simply have no time left for church.

While much has changed in the last decade, this simple fact remains: You and your children need to be in a physical location, at least weekly, with other Christians. They need visible, tangible reminders of the goodness of God in the sacraments. They need the nearness of God found in prayer. They need to gather with other disciples from all walks of life. They need to hear the old man in the pew behind them singing "Amazing Grace" for the ten-thousandth time. They need to watch the teenager, ten years down the road, walking faithfully with God. If Jesus calls the church his bride, and if he gave the keys of the kingdom to the church, then the church is essential to your child's discipleship.

2. Prepare them for eternity.

Discipleship is not about preparing your children to live better lives in this world. Read that again. Much of evangelical Christianity has been poisoned by the prosperity gospel. We may not believe God will make us millionaires, but we're sure that Jesus ought to make our lives more enjoyable and easier.

However, Jesus tells his disciples in John 16 that he is training them not so they will live better, more productive, and less encumbered lives. Instead, he tells them about the glories of the gospel—"that in me you may have peace" (verse 33). Why? "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (verse 33 NIV).

11. For every family, there may be exceptional circumstances and seasons where virtual church is the best choice. However, every family should move back toward in-person worship as soon as it is feasible and wise. If a church or family's worship experience is only virtual, there cannot be an experience of all the ordinary means of grace or a real, physical community that supports one another.

Today, a disturbing amount of evangelical Christianity focuses on making Earth a more comfortable place. To that end, we put our hopes in political figures, education, morality, fiscal policies, and international relations. These areas just listed are worthy of our attention and care as humans made in God's image. We are to be caretakers and stewards of God's good creation (more on this in a later chapter).

But when anything (literally anything) is put forward as the *thing* that will finally bring us peace—be it a new house, president, school, friendship, or athletic pursuit—we miss what Jesus explicitly told his disciples: “In this world, you will have trouble.” Discipling our children toward the kingdom of God means they will live at odds with the world. Faithful disciples will take the narrow path and make choices that will ostracize them. They will have trouble because Jesus promised they would, and Jesus tends to be a man of his word.

This work of preparing our children to face trouble is very, very good work. Paul says it this way: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

It isn't worth wasting a millisecond of Paul's time, energy, or mental space to even consider that his suffering in this life is not worth it. Remember, this is Paul, who was jailed, beaten, and shipwrecked and became the laughingstock of major first-century cities. From his conversion right to the very end was nothing but hardship, and yet Paul ties his hopes to eternity. Paul understands that while tomorrow may be different, it will simply bring different challenges.

In a world that tells them they have limitless potential, your children will eventually come face-to-face with their own shortcomings. In a world that tells them they can be anything they want to be and have everything they desire, your children will experience disappointment. It's for this reason that parents who lead their children to God with eternity in mind can literally change the

world. That's not an overstatement. Any parent can change the world, and it starts with going home and preparing our children for trouble.

When children expect trouble in this life *and* place their hope in eternity, they become resilient people who can bear the burdens of life and live as faithful and fruitful witnesses of the grace of God. Can you imagine the adults they'll become? Perhaps they'll be able to stay married even in the face of immense hurt. Maybe they'll stay in a challenging but necessary job instead of finding something with the promise of greater ease or "flexibility" every few years. Likely, they will feel less of a need to detach with the assistance of substances, video games, and pornography. Instead, when life becomes challenging, they'll think, *Yeah, I expected this, and it's a good thing my well-being doesn't depend on this going well. The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in me.*

What Will This Require?

Most research on human motivation shows that we must have a significant *why* to take sustained action toward a goal. In other words, we must feel a sense of purpose behind the things we do in order to consistently do the things we do. Goals without a motivating *why* become graveyards of good intentions. My son's bedroom comes to mind when I think of these graveyards. Despite his parents' repeated requests to keep his room at least moderately sanitary, he lacks a purposeful *why*. In fact, our demands of cleanliness may only serve to demotivate him.

While Sarah and I are only trying to teach our child some life-management skills, he likely hears something different, and it goes like this: When it comes to my room, I am *useful* inasmuch as I'm able to keep it clean.

The concept of usefulness is bizarre for most of us to consider as it's very nearly the air we breathe. Western culture subconsciously esteems usefulness.

We are raised to be useful, productive citizens. You may not know who you are outside of your usefulness. You likely strive to become more useful and look for others who are useful to you. And yet, usefulness is a terrible long-term motivator. God made us to transcend mere usefulness: we are most motivated when we know we are worthy of delight simply because of who we are.¹²

Usefulness is not useless, however. In fact, it is a good part of what God made us for. The problems come when we elevate usefulness above or even alongside our core identity of worthiness. Consider the creation account of Genesis 1:26. God proclaims his delight in man's identity ("Let us make man in our image, after our likeness") before he declares his usefulness ("let them have dominion").

Think of it this way: You are useful to the economy until your money dries up. You are useful to your job until they decide to replace you. You are useful to your children's happiness until they hate you. Your body is useful until it experiences more pain than pleasure. My son is useful so long as he keeps a clean room? Yikes!

What would be more motivating to my son is to remind him again and again that we value him for who he is wholly outside of the condition of his room. This is not some emotional platitude; it's simply our attempt to see our son how God sees him. We do not need him to keep his room clean. Instead, we want him to see his bedroom as a gift from God. It's a place he can rest from a hard day's work. It's a place he can create, build, dream, and grow. It is a place he's called to steward, but it is not a place where he earns or loses our affection. Only when he understands this will his care for his bedroom move beyond a means to prove his usefulness. Only then will he truly learn to steward what God has provided.

If a child's life is hard to imagine, consider your own adult-sized challenges.

12. Much of the content in the next few pages is greatly influenced by Alan Noble, *On Getting Out of Bed* (InterVarsity Press, 2023), 97–99.

I'd imagine you naturally gravitate toward friendships where you're loved simply for who you are, not for your skills, gifts, or abilities. As you drift into middle adulthood, for example, you'll find freedom if your marriage is not primarily predicated on physical attraction but is deeply rooted in the safety of being simultaneously known for all your flaws and yet endlessly loved.

If what I'm describing sounds a lot like how God sees you, you're right. God is vastly different from the world: It's not because you are *useful* to God that he is interested in you. He doesn't need anything from you.

Sadly, we've raised a generation of Christians who wrongly believe that God is waiting around for them to *do something*. Have we forgotten Paul's words before the Areopagus? "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, *nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything*, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:24-25, emphasis mine).

God did not make you and sustain you so that you can be useful to him. He created you and loves you because he wanted to and it brings him glory to do so. To God, your life is a good act of creation and it remains good despite your sin, age, skills, beauty, strength, and charisma. You are his delight without qualification.

When we see God in this way, he naturally becomes the reorienting *why* of our lives. If God loves you *that* deeply—and he does—why wouldn't you want to know him? Our hearts desperately long to hear that we matter simply because we exist, not because we have checked the boxes that make someone proud of us.

The only truly life-giving *why* for you and your family is a whole-hearted pursuit of God. From this posture, we see that our existence transcends that of usefulness. We are beloved. We are wonderfully made. We can work, rest, love, care, mourn, and find happiness without the worry that our usefulness to God

is in jeopardy. We are safe. That type of rootedness is the place from which God disciples us.

A clean house can be a wonderful place for hospitality and a well-ordered life. However, it requires our utility and will leave us feeling empty if we cannot achieve a self-determined level of cleanliness.

Youth sports are fine tools that help us experience the goodness of creation and friendship, but they are terrible *whys* because they demand our performance.

Your career is perhaps the place where you will do the most good in the world. And yet, it asks that you remain sharp, intelligent, and...useful.

You were designed for only one ultimate *why*: God.

The apostle Paul knew of this *why* when he wrote to the Philippians that he counted all his accomplishments and pedigree a loss. Why? “Because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8).

If Paul, who had perhaps the most intimate experience with Jesus of anyone on this side of heaven, found knowing Christ to be his *why*, then perhaps we could learn something from him. The surpassing worth of knowing God is the *why* that gives us the wherewithal to...

...pursue being discipled by Jesus (your kids aren't the only ones who need him).

...surround ourselves with community, even when it seems costly.

...invest in a church that loves Jesus.

...invite and trust others who love Jesus to take active roles in our children's discipleship.

As we experience the blessings of discipleship, what may feel stressful right now will turn into something we love, which is good news—because we build our lives on the things we love, almost subconsciously.

So, what is your *why* when it comes to raising your children? If it is to shape them into useful citizens of this world, your journey and theirs will be full of

stress and exhaustion. They won't meet the mark, ever. As Jesus said, they *will* have trouble. Eventually, their usefulness won't be enough, will wear out, and will become irrelevant.

But if your *why* is to form your children into citizens of heaven who know that God delights in them with no qualifications, they will become humble, fruitful people who enjoy God and love their neighbors. Though they will struggle in this world, they will glory in the new heavens and new earth.

So far we have a good recipe for building your *why*, but it is missing one crucial ingredient.

Captivation, Not Agreement

Often, we mistake mental agreement for heartfelt captivation. Almost all Christian parents agree with the concept of discipleship. They see the value in it. They see the need for it. Perhaps those who have agreed with the idea will take it out for a spin—that is, until it gets hard. Difficulty will break anyone who merely agrees with a concept. But those who are captivated at an emotional level are like immovable trees planted by streams of water.¹³

God made us to be captivated by a story bigger than ourselves. You see this all over the Bible. Psalm 8:3-4 captures this when the writer sings, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” Or look at Psalm 19:7-10:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More

13. Psalm 1.

to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

I'm just going to say what's on my heart here. The words of Psalm 8 and Psalm 19 and the mood in the room of most American churches on Sunday morning could not be any different. It's like a big game of "one of these things is not like the other." Psalm 8 and 19 make me blush. They thrill my heart. They lift my eyes to the spectacular work of God, while many evangelical churches look like a snooze fest. People don't sing. They sit stoically, hands folded like they're at supper with the Queen of England. They scurry out the back door as soon as the whole fiasco is over.

Christians are bored, but it's not because God is boring. We've simply become distracted by lesser pleasures. Parents who agree that God is good but are bored by him will raise children who are also bored by God.

But here's the thing. Nobody who knows God through how he reveals Himself in the Bible and through the work of the Holy Spirit could possibly find him to be boring. No, instead what has happened is many have become content to set their affections on other things.

C.S. Lewis famously said,

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹⁴

In the following chapter, we'll try to set aside the mud pies and lift our eyes to recapture the joy offered to those who become disciples of Jesus.

14. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (HarperCollins, 2001), 26.

This requires parents who are willing to do three things.

1. Relinquish control of what only God can do.

A few years ago, I began my obsession with having a perfect lawn. I began by applying fertilizer one morning, but by the afternoon, there was no noticeable difference in its lushness (imagine that!). So I applied more. The next morning, there was still no change. So I applied a third and heavier dose of fertilizer. Over the next two weeks, my grass died. The fertilizer was not working on my (albeit ridiculous) timeline, so I seized control of the situation (while also not reading the instructions). The result was the opposite of the intended effect. If I had been patient, my lawn would have been beautiful in three to five days.

I see a lot of parents who seize control when they don't see the results of discipleship in the time frame they expect. Others completely give up. But a fight-or-flight response to discipleship is an anxious grab for control of the uncontrollable. Proverbs 21:1 reminds of this: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." And so it is with your child's heart. Your anxious toil does little good next to the work of God's effortless hand.

2. Accept responsibility for your part in discipleship.

While God is your child's primary discipler, you are very likely the primary person he invites into that process. You are the one who introduces your children to God. You are the one who models what a relationship with God looks like. You are the one who engages them in conversation about what God is doing in their lives. Paul writes in Romans 10:14, "How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?" Our job is to put our children in the places where they can hear the good news.

3. Become captivated by the work of God.

Let it be the *why* that reorients your family's life. Every member of your family has a God-given desire to pursue beauty, excellence, goodness, and a host of other qualities that are only fully found in God's presence. Have you allowed your God-given desire to be partially fulfilled in lesser pleasures rather than allowing them to propel you to a fullhearted experience of God?

Much of the rest of this book will dance between the paradigm of parental responsibility and God's gracious and active role in discipleship. But first, to dance this dance day after day—not only well but willingly—requires us to step backward and recapture a sense of what Jesus knew of discipleship.