

# CHAPTER 12

## Healing Yourself to Heal Your Child

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.*

— 2 Corinthians 1:4 (NIV)

As a young child, my family traveled deep into Mexico to accompany my father on a business trip. While he attended meetings, our mother and the children were able to go sightseeing. One particular memory from this trip has lingered in my mind for many years.

While visiting a beautiful church on one of our sightseeing excursions, we noticed platforms on each side of the centuries-old structure. Asking our guide about the platforms, he explained that there were many converts to Christianity among the native people who lived in the nearby mountains. The platforms had been erected on the sides of the church so when they came down from the mountains to worship God, they could also perform rituals to the sun god, fertility goddess and other pagan deities.

As a child I was struck by how odd this custom seemed. There was nothing in my cultural or religious background that made such a practice even remotely familiar. I remember wondering how it was that these people could have come to believe in and worship God, while at the same time still be so tied to their past beliefs and traditions. Yet in the Old Testament the children of Israel, called by the one true God, repeatedly fell into worshipping and yielding their allegiance to other gods (e.g., Numbers 25 and Judges 2). By our nature we are people prone to have divided loyalties, so to speak. In a similar manner, many of us experience adoption into the family of our Heavenly Father through faith in Jesus Christ, but we continue to be heavily influenced, and in some cases bound, by patterns from earlier in our lives and by the brokenness of this world.

### *Facing the Past, Finding Hope for the Future*

We find that parents often minimize the importance of what they themselves bring to the table when it

comes to parenting and connecting with their children. After all, the past is in the past and there is nothing we can do to change it, right? As Lewis Smedes writes in *The Art of Forgiving*, “One of God’s better jokes on us was to give us the power to remember the past and leave us no power to undo it.”

Experience has shown and research reinforces that although this important topic may be often overlooked, it is foundational for parents in establishing strong and enduring connections with their children to help them overcome their past wounds and present challenges. Many of our children come to us having experienced trauma, neglect and loss, and as a result have developed attachment styles that are anything but secure. Naturally, we want to lead our children to security and healing, but too often we discover that we do not know the way there for ourselves. The undeniable reality is that, just as with our children from hard places, our past affects our future, but the good news for us and our children is that the past does not determine our future. We must never forget that we are loved by God who is capable and intent on putting the broken pieces of our lives back together and bringing healing to our deepest wounds. It is critical, however, that parents be as intentional about dealing with their own past as they are about focusing on their child’s past.

Research on parenting and attachment styles shows that there is a significant likelihood that parents will pass their attachment style and some of their own “emotional baggage” from one generation to the next, just as they themselves “inherited” the same from their parents. In fact, one of the greatest predictors of a child’s attachment style is their parent’s attachment style, coupled with the degree to which a parent has or has not adequately dealt with and resolved his or her past (including past losses and trauma).

## ***Inherited Disconnect***

*By Dr. Karyn Purvis*

Bob’s childhood was a miserable one. His father was an alcoholic and an abuser. Escaping his chaotic home as a young adult, Bob married and began a family, vowing he would never treat his children like his father treated him. As a father of three, Bob was devoted to the Lord, was a man of character and adored his growing family. A leader in the church, he spent Sundays teaching Bible study, working in the church nursery and worshiping with his family. Knowing about his childhood and his devotion to his family, I was dismayed one Sunday standing in the side entrance to the church nursery where an unnerving scene unfolded.

Three-year-old Tommy stood beside his father’s leg, shaking his small hand in the air, and crying steadily. His father, Bob, was enraptured in a deep theological discussion with another father who was also volunteering in the nursery. Tommy persistently continued tugging on Bob’s pants, and whimpering for what seemed an interminable period of time. Finally Bob and his friend paused their discussion, and he knelt down to his whimpering son. “Tommy, what’s wrong” he asked to which the preschooler replied, “My finger got hurt in the door!” With softening voice, Bob continued “Tommy, let’s ask Jesus to make it feel better.” After uttering a simple “healing” prayer Bob stood up and continued his theological discussion with his friend, leaving a sniffling and bewildered three-year-old standing silently by his leg.

Bob, like many other Christian fathers, is a good man and a committed father, but his childhood

experiences, and his purposeful intention to be a godly father, had obscured some of the simple truths of faith. In that moment, his young son needed his immediate attention as well as practical expressions of love and care. Tommy didn't need merely a prayer with words about comfort; he needed to receive comfort. He needed to be swooped into his father's strong arms and cradled tenderly against his chest until the pain had passed. He needed to know that his father's attention would be given to him immediately when he was hurt and crying. He simply needed to be held and comforted. His dad could have had the theological discussion anytime, but opportunities to build trust and relationship with his son wouldn't always be available. Developmentally, a three-year-old can't understand abstractions; they live in a concrete world. Young children need embodied expressions of God's compassion and tenderness if they are to learn to trust His love.

What's more, it is doubtful that Bob would have reacted in the same way had he accidentally smashed his own finger in a door. More likely, he would respond naturally to the pain, by holding his injured hand with the other hand, pressing it against himself and swaying back and forth. If he had uttered a "prayer" during those moments, the words might not have been so pretty. But he would have given immediate, undivided, physical and emotional attention to the injury.

Although Bob was a committed believer he was unaware of his child's deepest needs. He would never harm his child, but he was unable to hear Tommy's voice or understand the needs he expressed. Although Bob had come to the Lord as a young father, the vestiges of his own childhood experiences prevented him from having insights about how to better nurture and connect with his son.

## *Leading Our Children to a Place We've Already Been*

For most of us there are issues from our childhood that need to be explored, resolved and released—not only for our own sake, but also for the sake of our children. For some of us these issues involve unpleasant memories, fears or situations that caused tension in our families growing up. All in all they may seem rather insignificant. For others, however, the issues involve loss, harm, abuse and other traumatic and deeply painful experiences, which have left us emotionally wounded and scarred. All of these past hurts and issues, whether large or small, can essentially "stand between" us and our children if left unattended and unresolved. Our unresolved past has the potential to inhibit our ability to see our children's true conditions and needs and can ultimately impair our ability to connect with them. Without our knowledge or permission, our past can silently rob both us and our children.

Many people have told us their stories, but a few illustrate this issue well:

- A pastor's wife tells of how she allowed her 12-year-old son to be physically violent with her in order to show him God's unconditional love. Only later did she realize that she was repeating the pattern of her own childhood, where she grew to mistakenly accept her father's physical beatings as a sign of love.
- A missionary recounts his dismay as he realized the root of the conflict with his 8-year-old son not meeting his expectations was actually that he had adopted a child the exact age of his own brother

who drowned when they were swimming together as children. Having never adequately dealt with and resolved the childhood loss of his brother, this father discovered that in a real sense he had somehow thought his son would be able to ease the aching memory and loss of his brother.

- A devout church elder shared that because his father was an alcoholic, he was determined to keep his son on the “straight-and-narrow” at all cost. Over time he realized his childhood experiences of growing up with an alcoholic parent were clouding his ability to understand his child and see who he really was.
- A precious Christian mother told me through bitter tears that as a teenager she aborted her first child and had never been able to forgive herself. Over time, she had come to realize that part of her motivation for adopting a child had been an attempt to save another child from abortion and to help heal her own pain. She now realized that in order to be fully present for her daughter she needed to accept God’s forgiveness.

Each of these Christian parents is devoted to their family and seeking to follow God. Yet for each, interactions with their children were negatively affected by the burdens and pain of their early histories. These parents are not alone. We all have feet of clay when it comes to breaking free from our past. We all need to explore areas of loss and painful experiences from our childhood that may be keeping us from a joyful, healthy relationship with our children. The simple truth is that it is nearly impossible for a parent to lead a child to a place of healing if the parent does not know the way herself. Therefore, we must recognize that a critical aspect of our role in helping our children connect and heal is to travel the journey of healing ourselves.

## Key Scripture Verses

*All praise to the God and Father of our Master, Jesus the Messiah! Father of all mercy! God of all healing counsel! He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us. We have plenty of hard times that come from following the Messiah, but no more so than the good times of his healing comfort—we get a full measure of that, too.*

—2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (*The Message*)

## How Do We Get from Here to There?

The path toward healing for both us and our children is one that is sure to have many ups and downs and twists and turns. It will not unfold easily or quickly, and it is a journey that we are not meant to travel alone.

Scripture makes clear that we were created to connect. With the Holy Spirit as our ever present guide, we must be willing to invite and welcome others to walk with us on this journey. Along the way we need to take time to pause, reflect and pray as we remain open and receptive to the “healing comfort” of God (2 Corinthians 1:5). But we should always remember that authentic healing—for both us and

our children—will almost certainly take time. The transformation that we long for will not happen overnight. It is a process, and one we must intentionally and persistently pursue with fierce honesty and a willingness to forgive.

We need to also cling to the truth that no life is too broken, no past too imperfect, no heart too wounded for our loving God to redeem and begin to heal. Jesus has extended the invitation: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28, NIV). We need to accept his invitation and find rest and hope in him and all that he has made available to us.

Fundamentally, as those who have placed our faith in Christ and been adopted into the family of God we must come to realize, maybe for the first time, that we cannot truly understand ourselves until we begin to grasp just how much we are loved by our Heavenly Father. Our truest identity, and that of our children, is found in Him. We are loved by a God of hope who himself is no stranger to the brokenness and suffering of this world. This same God desires to put the broken pieces of our lives together with the broken pieces of the lives of our children to fashion something truly beautiful and bring glory to His name.

We have been given the privilege of joining Him in this journey, and what a privilege it is. May we remain ever faithful as we travel for the sake of our children and in response to the abundant love of the One who has called us.

## *Questions to Consider and Discuss:*

- 1. How much emphasis do you place on the importance of your role (including your own history and attachment style) in the process of developing a strong and secure connection with your child?**
- 2. What issues or hurts from your past might you need to reflect on and deal with in order to be more fully present and emotionally available to your child?**
- 3. Thinking in terms of leading your child to a place you have already been yourself, what issues or challenges is your child facing that might require you to travel the healing journey for yourself in order for you to be more effective in leading your child toward healing?**
- 4. What are some specific steps you need to consider taking in order to experience healing for yourself? What are some specific sources of help and encouragement that can help you?**