

# CHAPTER 8

## Nurturing at Every Opportunity

*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son ...*

— John 3:16 (NIV)

God’s ultimate response to sinful humanity is love—a love that gave and always gives. As Paul wrote to the Romans, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, NIV). As those who have received this gift of undeserved love, our hope should be to demonstrate this same kind of giving, selfless love in ways that draw our children into a deeper personal relationship with our giving Lord and with us.

As parents, we have the opportunity not only to teach but to embody God’s love for our children. Consider a parent tenderly cradling her newborn. The mother’s face is glowing as her child peers through blurry vision to see his preciousness reflected in her joyful smile. Her voice is warm and welcoming, inviting a deep and soothing connection. A warm sensory bath of loving care envelops the infant. This scene is repeated hundreds of times in the first days of life. Out of this spontaneous, affectionate, connected dance between parent and child, this little one develops trust in the knowledge that his parent truly cares for him. In these arms of nurturing love, this child learns who he is, the meaning of unconditional love and his heart is being prepared to understand the eternal love of God.

Yet because of their histories, many of our children are not able to readily understand and accept this love because they have never come to realize just how precious they are to God and us. Many of them did not receive positive attention and healthy affection when they were young. As infants they may not have been held in the arms of adoring parents whose faces reflected an undeniable joy at the very presence of their lives. As toddlers they may have been denied nurture and comfort. As they grew older they may have never experienced affirmation, praise or encouragement.

### *Nurturing Guidance*

Our God is a nurturing God. We see this throughout Scripture as He nurtures His children in many different ways—by comforting those who are hurting and troubled (2 Corinthians 1:3-4), by providing for our physical needs (Matthew 6:28-34), by encouraging us (Romans 15:4) and by correcting us (Hebrews 12:4-11). Yes, God nurtures even when He is correcting us.

Likewise, purposing to embody God’s love to our children doesn’t mean that we won’t have to

discipline and correct. As we've already learned, we will inhibit our children's ability to grow and develop if we do not provide the consistent correction they need. However, our correction must always be based in and emanate from our relationship with and love for them, just as God's correction of us flows from His love for and relationship with us (Hebrews 12:6). In that sense we must always be connecting even when we are correcting. It is most certainly that love—from us and ultimately from God—and all that flows from it that will bring about the ultimate transformation we desire for our children.

## *The Power of Encouragement*

I've often wondered what it would have been like to travel with the Apostle Paul on his early missionary journeys. There is no doubt that Paul was an intelligent and passionate follower of Christ whom God used mightily to shape the early church as well as to inform much of our theology. But it's also quite possible that he was more than a little exacting and probably not always very encouraging. We see a glimpse of this in his interaction with John Mark in Acts 15 where we find him less than encouraging to the young disciple.

We read in Acts 15 that Paul had become upset with John Mark because he had deserted them earlier in the journey. As a result, Paul was unwilling to suffer John Mark and his failures any longer and essentially expelled him from the team. However, Barnabas immediately stepped forward to pick John Mark up, so to speak, and to encourage him onward. After all, what would you expect from Barnabas, a man whose name meant "Son of Encouragement"?

True to the meaning of his name, Barnabas' encouragement was obviously effective as we see John Mark, also known as Mark, continue in the faith and eventually record an eyewitness account of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark. Barnabas was able to see potential and value in John Mark that Paul simply was not able or willing to see. However, the success of Barnabas' continued encouragement and investment in John Mark was eventually recognized even by Paul himself late in his ministry when he wrote approvingly of Mark to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:11).

The reality is that we as parents of children from hard places need to always be mindful to be a 'Barnabas-like' presence in the lives of our children. There is little doubt that they will stumble, fall and fail, but the power of our encouragement, praise and affirmation should never be underestimated as we seek to help them get back on track and move forward to reach their God-given potential. Much like Barnabas did for John Mark, we must understand that our children need nurture expressed in ways that encourage and motivate them, and we must be willing to provide it as often as it is needed.

## *Closing the Gap*

*By Amy Monroe*

Sue and Ron had three biological children who were healthy, happy and loved the Lord. Life was good and honestly it was fairly simple, at least until they went on a mission trip and visited a Russian orphanage. It was there that they knew in their hearts God was calling them to adopt—and not just adopt any child but a 10-year-old girl named Sasha. They were excited about what God was going to do in and through their family, but they were quite nervous as well.

Sue and Ron knew many families who had already adopted and some of what they knew about these families' experiences was more than a little scary. Most of them adopted older children from Russian orphanages, some from Sasha's orphanage, and most had encountered significant challenges not long after they returned home. As they reflected on the struggles that these families faced, Sue and Ron were determined to learn from these families' experiences.

One common aspect they observed among these families applied directly to their situation. It seemed that many of the families that adopted were already parenting biological children and doing so quite successfully overall. However, few of them were meeting with similar success in terms of applying their same parenting approach with the child they had just welcomed home. Time and time again these parents discovered that trying to fit their adopted children into the already existing patterns of life and way of doing things only resulted in heartache and frustration for everyone.

As Sue and Ron learned more about children who come from orphanage environments—the impact of their histories and what they need in order to heal—they discovered that many children who have experienced trauma and institutionalization function at an overall developmental age equal to roughly half their chronological age. For them, this meant that although Sasha would be coming home as a 10-year-old girl, she was likely to be significantly less than 10-years-old in terms of her developmental and emotional maturity. And once Sasha was home Sue and Ron immediately found this to be the case.

The truth was that Sasha had no idea what it meant to be part of a family. She had no healthy experiences giving or receiving nurture, no practice at making choices or using her words to communicate her feelings or needs and no understanding of how to control her own behavior. In addition to being aware of these realities, Ron and Sue also had some understanding about the potential impact that the years of orphanage life likely had on Sasha's physical, cognitive and emotional development.

As a result Sue and Ron committed to dramatically simplify their lives in order to provide Sasha what she needed most. They withdrew from many family outings and activities for a while—even from the routine of going to church each week, although they stayed closely connected to those in their church. They educated Sasha at home for over six months and constantly encouraged her as she learned English and tackled new academic subjects. Most importantly, they began to teach Sasha about God's love for her and to model that in practical and tangible ways.

Despite these and other efforts, Sasha seemingly could not get enough of the nurture Sue and Ron were offering. Sue found that Sasha would literally follow her around the house all day long for weeks on end. For months Sue never had any alone time until the kids had all gone to sleep. When Sasha would become upset and hysterical, often over the smallest thing, they found that holding her and even rocking her would usually help calm her. It certainly felt a bit strange to hold and rock a 10-year-old, but Sasha clearly needed the nurture. So, they did not hesitate to provide it. They affirmed Sasha consistently and praised and encouraged her at every opportunity. They allowed her to play with toys and watch television shows more suited for a 5-year-old than a girl Sasha's age. In short, they did the best they could to allow Sasha to start at the beginning and experience all that she had missed in order to connect and help develop trust.

Day by day Sue and Ron began to see significant changes in Sasha. Her confidence grew, and she was connecting with them as well as her new siblings. As they began to venture out, Sasha even began to make friends. In time, they saw the gap between Sasha's chronological and developmental age close dramatically, and they had the privilege of watching her mature and blossom into a

wonderful young woman. Sue and Ron would be the first to tell you that Sasha's first year home was the most difficult year of their lives, but they would not hesitate to tell you that all of their efforts to offer Sasha the nurture she needed were more than worth the sacrifice.

## Key Scripture Verses

*This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends.*

—John 15:12-13 (*The Message*)

## The High Cost of Love

There is a difficult truth that we must be willing to face if we are serious about loving our children the way that God would have us love them and the way they need to be loved. That truth is that biblical love is costly—very costly. In fact, it is a call to die to ourselves, and we should not pretend that it will be easy or even come naturally. God demonstrated His love for us by giving nothing less than His Son (John 3:16), and He has called us to live a life of love by giving ourselves. We have been called to love as He has loved us (John 15:12).

While this focus on love and providing nurture sounds good and right, we must be prepared for the real tensions and challenges that will undoubtedly arise. Each of us must be willing to count the cost when following Jesus (Luke 14:28) and traveling the adoption journey in a way that offers healing to our children and brings glory to our Lord. The daily decisions to be selfless rather than selfish; the constant battle between our willingness to pay the high cost of providing the love and nurture our children need versus defaulting to the convenience, ease and familiarity of simply “making them obey”—these are but a few examples of how we must choose to love, and to live out that love in ways that build trust and bring healing to our children.

It is a high calling with a high cost, but it is what He has called us to, and we dare not travel this journey on our own. God has given us His love, His Word and His Spirit to show us the way and to empower us to put our “lives of love” on the line for our children.

## Questions to Consider and Discuss:

1. Do you see yourself as a nurturing parent? Explain why or why not.

**2. How specifically can you begin to more intentionally nurture your child? How do you think he/she will respond?**

**3. Are there ways that your child needs to be nurtured (according to your child's developmental age not his/her chronological age) that you are not comfortable with or equipped to provide?**

**4. Thinking about how to nurture your child in terms of offering praise and encouragement, how can you specifically be more "Barnabas-like" toward your child?**

**5. What are some ways that you need to "put your life on the line" for your child?**