



A RIGHTEOUS BROOD

making your family
the front line of mission

▲ Hugh Halter

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The Righteous Brood: Making Your Family the Front Line of Mission
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Introduction: Coffee Time

Since our marriage began twenty years ago, Cheryl and I have tried to commit to having coffee together twice a day. The morning cup is simply for waking up together, getting a head's up on the events of the day, watching our dogs and cat rummage around the yard. The second cup is usually shared around four in the afternoon. It tends to be about recapping the tragedies and triumphs that may have occurred throughout the Halter family that day. Personally, I don't really like the morning cup. I'm an introvert and an ogreish troll when I wake up, so when my extroverted wife wants to splatter words and questions into the atmosphere like an AK-47, it takes all the discipline in the world to look like I'm into it. I'll tell you about my 24-year-old son Ryan in more detail later, but for now let me simply mention he has a bugger of an epilepsy condition. Consequently, many of these morning cups are sipped after only a couple hours of sleep. And when his seizures hit every night for weeks in a row, this cup of dark java is less about savoring and more about survival!

It's the afternoon cup that I most look forward to enjoying. Traditionally, some of our best visions, plans, dreams, and creative ideas have come from this hour. We dream about vacations, about Ryan getting better, about our girls'

hockey tournaments, my latest book exploits, our church community, where I'm traveling next, about what our date might be for the week (okay, the month), and a host of other hopeful opportunities.

As we look back, most of our dreams have gone unfulfilled. We've just been stuck in the mundane reality of our children's schedules, financial constraints, balancing ministry and house painting, and of course Ryan's severe disability.

Until finally, in the fall of 2011, everything changed.

By sheer Providence we found a 350-person assisted living ranch for adult disabled people. Ryan got accepted into the program and left his 10 x 10-foot room where he's primarily spent his entire life—and which holds all his personal and precious items—and will be relocating half way across the country. Regretfully, he will have to leave behind his collection of samurai and William Wallace Swords that means so much to him. He actually asked the staff if he could bring a “few really dull knives” with him. Those puppies are actually four feet long and, even without a sharp edge, could do some damage in the hands of some autistic extrovert. So he'll have to travel to the ranch sword-less, and this will be a harsh blow for him.

Ryan also has to leave his weekly beer behind. On his twenty-first birthday, some men from our church took him out for his first Coors Light, and ever since that day he's kept his faithful tradition of enjoying one Saturday night beer. Alas, the once-a-week Coors has to remain with the swords at home. No alcohol is allowed in his new disabled Disneyland environment. Even though these adjustments will be tough for him, he's never been so excited about

what he perceives will be a real “grown up” life.

Yes, we are sad that our boy will be leaving the house. However, because he is so excited, we are thrilled for him.

All right. Candidly, we’re also pretty excited for US!

As you can imagine, the constant care and trauma of Ryan’s twenty-four years of grand mal seizures has been brutal on us. His disabilities have kept us from fulfilling more than a few of those afternoon dreams, especially the fun and ministry dreams we had for our girls. Our unpredictable life has also made it almost impossible to take more than a few days off together, and we’re only batting about fifty percent on actually getting through a whole date night. Often, we have to box our restaurant food up and head home early because he’s not feeling well.

So when Ryan’s plans were finalized, I started dreaming big. I said, “Hey, Babe, my plan is that in a year you and I will take that trip of a lifetime. I want to take a six-month sabbatical. We’ll start off with three weeks with the Tour de France, then Chunnel over to England, then bip up to Scotland for the British Open. When we get home, I’ll start building that log cabin from scratch!” I was undeterred by Cheryl’s furled brow and somewhat skeptical look, so I continued. “And I’m going to finally take those bagpipe lessons and then you can go skydiving, mountain climbing, and even ride a bull named FuManchu!” She wasn’t impressed by my ability to link a nice country western song into my plans for our future.

All I heard was the long drawn out slurp, as she slowly sipped her vanilla crème coffee. Then, as Cheryl looked over her steaming mug, she said, “You know, before we plan all this, maybe we should pray about our future.”

Without thinking, I blurted out, “Hell no! I ain’t praying about it. I don’t want God to screw up our only chance at a break, some frolicking and lack of responsibility!” Cheryl just rolled her eyes while I kept venting. “If we ask His opinion again, He’d probably have us move to the Congo and start an orphanage or make us go back into youth ministry. Or even worse, you’ll get pregnant and we’ll have to start all over again!”

Cheryl finally spoke, “You know, I’d love to have time to run an orphanage or maybe we could consider foster care.” (Drat! I knew it!)

She continued, “Yeah, I’d love to be able to take a few weeks off and do the Tour de France, that would be a dream come true. But now we have time to really help people. We could move downtown. I could travel with you a bit. Think what God could do with us now!”

As she kept casting an alternate vision for our future, I began to soften as I realized the beauty of Cheryl’s heart. My wife really wanted God to lead in the next season of our life. Our life has been hard, but it’s also been an incredible, unfolding story. We’ve seen God grow us and so many people around us, and we’ve even helped build two churches out of the grind of real life. Why would I want that to change? I guess I really don’t. I want Him to keep leading us through the real world. I want our lives to count. I want to know that every day will continue to have sacred moments where God works powerfully through our weaknesses. Yes, I want a log cabin, but even more I want a real story.

The tension and hope I just shared is exactly why I wrote this book for you. This book is about the mission

of God to reach, change, and redeem every part of this world. That's a powerful dream! The pain and sin of the world was and is so bad, that God put in motion the *Mis-sio Dei* (mission of God) to send a Redeemer to disarm sin, Satan, and set in motion a cosmic juggernaut of kingdom-priests who would shrug off their own kingdoms and the kingdom of darkness and work as salt and light to create a city on a hill full of God's blessing and wholeness. God's mission was to rescue the world and that mission is given to us.

God's call is first about drawing us to Him, and second about sending us out with the news that He's the Ultimate Friend to men. From God's call to Abraham to leave his homeland, to Jesus commissioning his disciples with the words, "As the Father has sent me...I now send you," we are called to be sent.

In addition, to be qualified to be "sent" you don't have to be a professional saint, or perfectly positioned. This missional call has always been given to the common folk: the exhausted priests, the prostitutes, the peasants, and those out of position.

The call to "go into the world" with the good news of God's favor is for everyone who struggles with human limitations, especially for you who can't find time to work-out or read a book because your family life is so crazy-busy. (Have you noticed that nobody is just busy anymore? We are all "crazy-busy.") The mission and call is for those whose families are messy and struggle with their own issues, for those who teeter on the edge financially. It's for those who parent alone and for those trying to blend families after many divorces and daily drama.

How can we, who barely have time to breathe open our hearts and homes to the weary and hungry and thirsty?

How can we feed our families, in all the metaphorical senses of that term, feed the world and still get enough down-time to keep us semi-human?

And furthermore, why would we sign up for that added stress?

Because, frankly, it is when we are willing to be sent, and spent that we are found and saved. Considering the needs of others “as a family” is the stuff that gives life meaning—it is a huge part of the way we heal our own wounds and it is what Jesus asked us to do because it is what makes God smile and brings us the deepest joy. It is also what I’ve observed as the most obvious missing ingredient in today’s Christian families.

Though it may seem like a sacrifice, the truth as we’ve seen it played out in our lives and in the lives of those at our church is that a family on mission to serve others in real need, together, is a family that avoids a lot of petty arguments, detours, and side-tracks. There’s nothing that is as clarifying to a brooding, privileged teenager than to spend some time as a family or with other kids in a soup kitchen or orphanage. Even a pre-school age child can be shown the power they have to make another child feel important or loved when they are raised in home that is sensitive to others.

Could it be that we’ve over-focused on the family to the point where we’ve become so ingrown and out of balance that we’ve not only neglected a hurting world, but have forgotten to teach our kids about natural, loving, outward-focused service, together, in the name of Jesus? And what if

this missing piece of the Christian family puzzle is why so many teens walk away from their faith and church as soon as they can? Their heads are stuffed with Bible knowledge, but they don't see Jesus showing up and changing lives around them, so why bother with the religious crap?

What does a missional family look like in reality? What are its obstacles? Its privileges? Its fruit?

Rather than preach at you, I'd like to share some stories with you, gleaned from our messy family and other messy families we know and love. Families who look just like yours and have radically transformed others' lives and their own because they opened their homes, their tables, or were simply willing to go and be with people in pain and bring them a drop of good news.

I think you'll be amazed and surprised and inspired at the transformative power of giving your life away and doing it on purpose, together.

Chapter 1: The Incredibles—Maybe Your Family?

It was after curfew in Bethlehem Bible College. I was with a small band of men who were on a reconciliation crusade and two young men from our faith community in Denver—one an ex-pro lacrosse player and the other a world renowned musician. Both a decade younger than me. Every night I had learned to expect them both to plan a physical attack on me. I think they liked beating up the ol’ man. The problem with their plan however, was that I was holding my own. On this night, I was tired and warned them that if an attack occurred, I would have to unleash the torrents of hell upon them and I turned over to go to sleep. Against all wisdom, rock star Brad jumped me! I quickly turned, threw him against the wall, most likely waking up everyone in the West Bank of Bethlehem, and proceeded to pummel him. I had him wedged on his bed and between gasps for air, he blurted out, “Get off me, Bob Parr!”

“What?” I said. “Who the heck is Bob Parr?” Then for the next few hours we talked about Bob—you know, the father in the cartoon masterpiece called *The Incredibles*. They said I looked like him—sort of bulking with a sturdy upper frame, large arms, beer gut, and pigeon legs. Well, after that I was actually quite proud because I thought the movie was epic!

If you haven't seen it, it's a story about some washed up super heroes who got sued and had to give up their adventurously meaningful existence and adopt instead a mundane suburban life. Bob, who when on top of his game was beloved by the people and feared by the villains, has now settled into a job as an insurance salesman, and his wife Helen, a.k.a. Elastigirl, who also used to live a hero's wild life, is now content to keep house and keep Bob from trying to relive the glory days. She has her hands full, however, because their three kids, Violet, Dash, and Jack-Jack, were all born with superpowers and are itching to find a positive outlet for their unique gifts.

Eventually, due to the evil villains who keep trying to destroy the world and create global chaos, the entire Parr family not only comes out of retirement, but also learns how to be a family on mission. Some days they have to act like normal citizens of Metroville, but then, without much warning, they are thrust into James Bond-like plots of James Bond. The parents as well as the children fight this strange paradox together, learning to use their unique gifts, and in the end they get to enjoy a sense of victory over the dark forces that target them and the innocent victims of Metroville.

Sure, they did exchange their safe, somewhat boring existence and had to deal with constant tension, but overall I'd say this family was no worse for the wear and quite proud that they had chosen adventure over apathy. Their lives individually, but even more, as a family, was INCREDIBLE!

I know it's a cartoon movie but you have to admit that it serves as a pretty fair metaphor for the opportunity every family has before them. No, I'm not suggesting that fat guys

put on red leotards, black boots, a cape, and ask their kids to follow suit, but the story of our faith is genuinely and in compelling fashion a saga of normal people, especially in family orientation, leaving the mundane suburban life (even if you don't leave the suburbs), finding their unique gifts, and forging together into the adventure and call of the mission of God. It's the story of the Christian faith . . . at least it was back in the day.

Theologically, we know that the Church is supposed to be on mission for God right? The church is called to leave what's comfortable and propel itself out into the darkness as light, into the decay of real life as salt, that its people are to live as aliens and strangers, living the counter-culture life of the Kingdom of God.

But here's a question we all need to consider. How can a church be missional unless the families are?

This is why I've written this book. I think somewhere between then and now we lost the story. Or at least we lost how the story came to us. Our Christian faith is an Eastern faith. That may or may not mean much to us Westerners who grow up bent on being wild West cowboy types, independent thinkers, and individuals! Eastern ways of life were based on family, lineage, passing down the story to the next generation, and carrying out God's plan together. When you read stories in the gospel where Jesus talks to one person and then he or she goes and tells the whole village, this is the Eastern way of life. The family mattered and God's primary means of extending the gospel to the world was through the family. Both the nuclear (father, mother, children) but also the family line (aunts, uncles . . . think *Big Fat Greek Wedding*).

Now, we're not going to deny our Western context or call you to trade in your minivan for a couple camels and sheep. We're not going to ask you to give up electricity, remove your kids from the soccer club or ask you to turn your basketball court into a wheat field. The world has indeed changed, but not God's plan. Yes, I do believe our world is more complicated. We have more options, more angles of diversion, and more confusion over what it really means to have a Christian family. Trust me, God knows the pressures you are up against, but He also knows His power to transform and re-engineer a family around His design of being the front edge of mission.

Your God and Father are super. His son was spectacularly super and the Spirit that indwelt him was extraordinary. I don't quite get it, but Ephesians 1:18-21 says,

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

This means, that you have a lot more resources at your disposal than you think you do! Mundane daily struggles you can count on, but God has a way of pulling the

miraculous out of it all. It may not always feel like it but His life and calling for your entire brood can emerge from the rubble of routine.

Moving in or out of Metroville

Before we start the adventure, we need to look down and take note of the terra firma we live in. The good ol' fashioned American dream world. For the Parr family, it was a place called Metroville. Parr for their course and Parr for us. It's a quiet, normal suburb with all the accoutrements of a missionless life. It represents safety—the children go to school, leave home, find jobs, and then repeat the cycle over and over again with no particular pizzazz. There's no particular goal of life other than to be happy. There's no substantial reason to be moral, to be different, to be inspirational. It's just a 24-hour day after another 24-hour day. Nothing mystical, nothing adventurous, nothing lost, nothing gained. Maybe it sounds a little like your neighborhood. Your life?

Metroville, or classic American life, is safer and a tad easier than raising your children during the Great Depression, the move West in the 1800's, or life during the Revolutionary War and subsequent settlements of the new world. But clearly, the classic suburban life has its dangers. Here are the ones you should really try to avoid:

The potential that your children will grow up without a vision for their lives.

The risk that your kids will fall short of their God-given talents and calling.

- The possibility that they will live in fear of what

people think of them, what could happen to them, and live a mundane, joyless life.

- That they will settle for a lame job, loser husband, or licentious lovers.

- That they will miss out on seeing the power of God, miss the voice of God, and thus the path of God.

- That the legacy God intended you to have on your children for His glory would be short-sheeted for temporal success.

These are the fears you should really have!

My own family's story

This book is not written as a concept. It's very personal to me. I've spent the better portion of twenty years training pastors on "how to make their churches more missional," but I've come to believe that it's really not about your pastors. It's about us. Every church would be missional if a good percentage of any church's families are. There's really no need for elaborate strategies on reaching the world if our own families ignite passionate faith and passionate living in their own children.

Life in Metroville has its struggle for sure, but trying to navigate mundane life, supernatural life, and temporal pressures with divine calling is even more difficult, so we promise to be honest. Just so you know, we've never been "professional" Christians. Although we've been in what feels like "full time" ministry, we've never had a full time paid existence. You'll hear stories of how several churches got started, lots of pastoral and evangelistic exploits, but all have come along the way of real life. I've been a house painter for twenty-two years and my wife, who is

extraverted on steroids, has had to keep her superhero one-sie locked in the closet because of the hourly needs of Ryan's epilepsy. He does have some good weeks, but we've had many years where he had five to ten seizures every twenty-four hours, so sleep has been a precious commodity and staggering around in a hazy fog was normal. We've got two girls who travel the globe playing ice hockey, so all that "soccer-mom" schedule applies! As we write this, the girls are sixteen and seventeen, and Ryan is now twenty-three, so we hope to give you a wide range of stories, experiences, vision, and reality.

For sure, Cheryl and I have lived with all the pressures and fears I have just spoken about. The choice to trade in our divine capes for Metroville's risk averse ethos has been put before us constantly and although we have many scars and war stories, we're happy to share what real life on-mission looks and feels like. Sometimes we'll look good and sometimes we don't look so good. Sort of like watching Jesus' friends and family who were trying to follow him.

What does our story mean? Simply this. We know that the call back to Metroville will always be a constant pressure and the only way for you to architect a larger story over your family will be to be clear on the beauty of the mission.

The mission of missional

Everyone's talking about this word "missional." Some think it means to be evangelistic, some think it means to be more socially conscious, and some think it's a style of ministry. None of those really get at it. The easiest and

most accurate way to view this word is “to be sent.” This is why we call people that leave something and then go somewhere else for a specific purpose “missionaries.”

But being sent isn’t the big deal of being missional. The big deal is why we’re sent. In other words, “sent to do what?” If you’re not clear on this, you’ll easily drift into the current of apathetic Christian life, and for sure your kids won’t choose that when they leave the house.

The story of God: the gospel of the kingdom. So, before we load our family up in the cannon of missional life, let’s make sure it’s worth it. In the introduction, we gave you a brief foreshadowing of the mission, but we’ll give a little more explanation here.

You see, if you’ve grown up in America and in the normal Christian bubble, the gospel fits nice and tidy within our local Metroville life. That is, we’ve been led to believe that the gospel is for after this life, and thus to be a good Christian family, or to be good Christian parents, is about avoiding sin, embedding or exposing our kids to Godly wisdom, helping them live a safe and successful life, extracting them from the foils of the world, and then wait until God comes back to give us the big payoff in the end. This is a generalized version, but if we’re honest it’s what many of us have been taught.

But when Jesus started his ministry in Mark 1:9, he began preaching for people to repent, or switch their entire life around, because, as he said, “The kingdom of God is now at hand.” In other words, that eternal life was now available NOW! Sort of like a king leaving the throne, walking down amidst all the peasants, and saying, “Look, the way I live up there behind all the high walls is now

going to be made available to you normal people down here in the muddy, cold streets.”

And as Jesus tried to help people learn about the Good News (gospel) of this new kingdom, he helped them see the specifics of why it was good news. In Luke 4, Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

This is why the Gospel was such good news. It meant that real life would change for people.

That’s the mission of missional. That’s why it’s worth taking seriously and why it’s worth the potential risks. The gospel (Good News of God’s Redemptive Kingdom Now) is everything. It’s the hope of the world, it’s the plumb line by which we should measure the worth of our lives, it’s the only reason any person would be willing to lay aside their own selfish motives, and it’s the gospel and all the hopes wrapped up in the gospel that will inspire you to persevere, go against the grain, and offer your kids the option to die for as well.

After Jesus said this, he then spent three years trying to train his followers to be like him so that they could help establish, model, expose, and invite people into this new way of living. Now you’d think it would have been the easiest thing to sell and franchise out, but it wasn’t. Instead, people found out that although the end result is good news, to get there one has to fight against selfish inward focus life, the natural currents of life, not to mention a pesky villain named Satan who quite frankly doesn’t like it when

Jesus followers actually decide to follow him. And regarding Metroville, to be good kingdomlings we can't be faithful to this mission unless we get serious about our materialism, our consumer-oriented tendencies and our bent toward individualism. We'll go after these later, but suffice it to say, it's worth weighing the cost. Most Christian families chose Metroville. For the sake of God's mission, I hope you don't.

So the gospel is transformative, but not without a real fight, real casualties, and real faith.

So herein lies the gut check that every parent must settle before the mission begins. Do we want Metroville Christianity or real kingdom Christianity to be the story we put before and call our children into?

The pull of Metroville

Metroville represents the kingdom of this world. Although it doesn't look dangerous, we all know it is. Jesus made some pretty harsh comments about the stark difference between his world and our world: "You cannot love both God and Money," "If you want to please people, you can't be a servant of God," "He who is not for me is against me," "Do not love the world or anything in the world for the love of the world."

His own words and the words of his followers make it pretty clear that God's ways are not our ways, and in fact the ways of the world are under the swirling control of Satan and his minions or spirits that spin the globe clockwise, sucking people into business, financial debt, relational strife, vice, depression, and a cornucopia of life habit you'd face down a charging lion to keep your kids away

from. Bummer is, it doesn't look like a predator trying to rip life from you and your children. It looks like the American dream and is guised in empty promises that seem to trip and snag most of us.

The second reason you might not take your family where Jesus wants you to is because of GRACE. Grace is getting stuff you don't deserve and not getting what you do deserve. The grace of God like a wild animal trainer who opens the door of a caged up gazelle, allowing it to run free. It's crazy, but God won't ever force His ways on us or our kids and He'll ask you to operate this way with your own kids. So for you and your children, apprenticing your family after the way of Jesus must be a choice. You can love Jesus, be thankful for his gift of grace, and your salvation and never leave Metroville. This book will be honest and we won't pull any punches. If you give Jesus your life, or even harder, the lives of your kids, it will be scary and you'll have to give them back to him . . . completely.

If it were up to me, I'd probably not call you to this level of life. I'm a people pleaser so I prefer you just be happy. But now that I'm about twenty-five years into our story, I also, yes, even more, want to call you away from risk management, safe environments, and small vision for your kids. The gospel of Jesus is the most wild, life-reorienting vortex you can ever be drawn into and I think your greatest joy will be to show them the real story and help them live the real story.

And someday, it will feel pretty cool to stand with your kids before Jesus and see him give everyone a wink, a big thumbs up, and to hear him say, 'Thanks, your family was a blast to watch live such a large life!'

The right questions to ask

What is behind your choice of the easy way?

Identify the fears you have of having an “incredible family?”

When you think about the story of your life—the gospel you received and passed down—will it be an inspirational story or not?

For God to have full access to calling you and your children into his ministry, what has to change in your thinking?

What has to change in your actions?

What has to change in your measurements of success?

Chapter 2: Beginning on the Altar—Where the Missional Family Is Born

After dropping my daughter's car off at the tire store, I walked across the street to what appeared to be a bookstore/coffee shop. With a couple hours to kill, I thought I'd get some writing done. Walking into any bookstore, my curiosity to see if any of my books are on the shelves takes over, so before settling down I made my way over to the "church" section. After quite a while looking at all the shelves, I stood there a little bummed that my books were strangely absent, "Oh, surely they must have sold out," I thought to myself. So I made my way to counter and asked them to look up the book *The Tangible Kingdom* to see when the next order would be coming in. "Sir, there's no book listed by that name," she said. "Hmmm, that's weird. Try the TK Primer or *AND: the gathered and scattered church*." After a few moments, she uncomfortably said, "Nope, none of those are listed either."

"Sheesh, oh well, must be a computer glitch or something," I replied. Her look clearly communicated that she thought I was a bit weird. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Well, yeah, how about a cup of coffee?"

This time her response was even stranger. She just

stared at me and then after what seemed like two hours, she gruffly bellowed out, “NO, we don’t have that either.” Now, I was ticked. It’s one thing to hide my darn books from me, but she had real nerve to withhold my favorite beverage. Crap, even the tire store has coffee!

“Well, do you have anything to drink?” I smirked back.

“Yes, we have suger-free hot chocolate.”

“FINE, I guess that will have to do.”

With a strong air of tension, I paid the lady and sat down, plugged in my computer and began to check emails. Within a few moments three college age girls came in, bouncy, happy, and chatty. They all knew the book witch personally, they hugged, smiled, and all took turns ordering chocolate cake, soda pop, and other tasty treats. Just then, I noticed that they all had on the little “Mormon badges” and the realization hit me, “This is a Mormon book store knucklehead! Of course they don’t have your books, of course they don’t have coffee! They don’t believe in it.”

My curiosity overwhelmed me and I tapped one of the girls on the shoulder and asked if they’d be willing to answer a few questions I had. They were all very kind and we saddled up to a round table.

“OK, so I have some questions about your faith. First, what’s with the coffee thing? Why don’t you indulge your Starbuck passions?”

“Oh, sir, based on our doctrinal teachings, we don’t consume anything that would be addictive.” Jokingly I inquired, “Well, what about the German Chocolate cake you’re all hoarking down?” They laughed and said, “Well, so far there’s no admonitions against chocolate cake, so we’re taking advantage of this freedom while we’ve got it.”

We talked a bit more about a host of religious issues and all three girls were delightfully fun to talk with. As they left, I remember being impressed by their devoutness, their willingness to deny themselves certain pleasures in order to remain faithful to their belief in God. They had what appeared to be a very safe circle of friends where the peer pressure is toward holiness instead of crazy behavior. Overall, the type of kids any parent would hope to have.

Yet, I also felt as if there was still something missing from what I hoped my children would become. Almost like there was something bigger than just having religious kids.

God's vision vs. a parent's hope

As we begin to consider letting God re-orient and re-architect our families to fit His mission in the world, it helps to talk briefly about the concept of vision. Most of us think vision is the same as having hope for our kids. Any loving parent hopes that their children avoid tragedy, find a godly spouse, get a good job, settle into a safe neighborhood, find a good church, etc. Sometimes we even hope they will make a difference in the world and take risks for God. But hopes are just hopes. No different than a “roll of the dice” or “a wing and prayer,” hopes have no power over our children. They are just emotional wishes that we hold out for.

Vision, on the other hand, is designed to actually change the future. There are many great quotes about vision, but one that has helped me says this, “Vision is the ability to see what God wants and move people toward His desired goal in any situation.”

The scriptures give us even a more active picture of this

in the earliest step of a person's life. When children were born, and often even before they were born, God seemed pretty interested in naming children.

The names were often associated with the character of who the person would be come, and often the names represented what God knew would happen with them. In a word, it was "prophetic vision." It sounds more complicated than it is, but prophetic vision combines a sense of knowledge about the individual, with a sense of God's heart or will for their lives.

This year in our church, we have had eighteen new babies. While celebrating a few Sundays ago, I asked if any of the parents had named their children after visions they had for their kids. A handful raised their hands and then proudly shared.

One said, "My grandson was born yesterday and his name is Cohen, which means, "brave one." My wife shared how our daughter Alli means, "Raven Haired Beauty." As more parents shared the names they gave to their children, you could see their vision for them.

Of course, there were many parents that looked at each other with a bit of disappointment, one girl even elbowed her husband as if to say, "Way to go, knucklehead, we just named our kid after a stupid TV show personality."

Well, if that's you, don't be too bummed. My parents named me Hugh and they have no reason for it. I was curious years ago and I looked up the meaning and it confirmed that my parents missed my calling and the reality of my life. Apparently, it means "the mind."

Regardless of whether you keyed into God's prophetic vision for your children at the naming of them or not, the

reality is the same. God has a vision for each of your children and we can all begin to rebuild a heavenly vision over them. True biblical vision means that you will have an empowering oversight that will help guide and develop them towards God's vision for them. It won't just be a hope. You'll have a hand in helping them see what God sees over them as well as helping them come into or take hold of His much larger plan for their lives.

Ownership vs. stewardship

As a pastor, one of my great joys is to be able to officiate weddings. Every once in a while, however, the experience is absolutely destroyed by overbearing parents. Maybe you've seen Steve Martin in *Father of the Bride* or watched the reality TV show *Wedding Gowns* where you get to see the darker side of weddings. Because the day is built up to be so special, it's quite normal for people to get uptight, fight over a wedding dress, or micromanage how the cake gets decorated. But amidst the normal stress, I often see a very sad scenario when the parents can't give the kids space and try to take ownership over the entire ceremony and their lives after the ceremony.

One lady I have painful memories about was the worst I've ever seen. The poor bride came in sobbing prior to the rehearsal and said, "I just can't go through with this!" I thought I was going to have to talk her into staying with her future husband, but the issue wasn't him. It was her overbearing mother who was trying to control her and her fiancé, all the preparations, as well as the rehearsal.

After she vented, threw many tears, I promised her that

I would handle it for her. As the rehearsal was about to begin, I confronted the mother and father and told them that I was running the show and that their only job was to shut up, smile, and agree with everything I was directing them to do. By my tone, I knew they understood how serious I was, but it didn't help. About every five minutes, she interrupted, drew attention to herself, and even cried to get attention. Then the wedding day came. We were all stressed! All I could tell the poor couple was, "It will soon be over." Fortunately God has a sense of humor and we all got to enjoy watching her trip on the first stair leading up to lighting the unity candles, stumble, screech, and then catch her Ace Ventura hairdo on fire as her head smacked into the candelabra. Everyone gasped as her entire head was consumed with a two-foot flame, but strangely no one came to her rescue. It's as if everyone in the stands and on the stage felt the same way, "Let her fry!"

I felt the same sentiment, but thought I should at least extinguish the inferno so we could finish the ceremony. So I reached down, patted her flames out with my hands, and quietly suggested that she go "freshen up."

The rest of the proceedings went off without a hitch, but I as well as this couple knew that they had a long miserable life ahead because of this mother's perceived "ownership" over them and her inability to "let go."

I always do four weeks of premarriage counseling based on some findings of four issues that always kill a marriage. Sex, money, learning how to fight, and "how to leave and cleave." The biblical idea is stated in Genesis 2:24—"Therefore shall a man LEAVE his father and his

mother, and shall CLEAVE unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (KJV, emphasis mine).

It’s built into God’s design, that husbands and wives are to be intimately linked as one and that it only happens when parents learn that they must someday truly “let go” so that the couple can become one. The reason I make sure to spend an entire week of counseling on this is because it’s such a huge problem.

Parents often feel like owners, that we created our kids, that we are solely responsible for their upbringing, protection, provision, and future. And when someone feels they OWN something or someone, it makes them act crazy. Whether it be a father who abusively yells at his kids from the bleachers, or a mother that withholds blessing because the child doesn’t get straight A’s in school, or this mother who was trying to live out her own dreams through her children, a sense of ownership may be the more debilitating misconception parents have.

The scriptures don’t teach ownership of anything. God instead teaches us about being stewards.

The parable of the talents in Matthew 25 teaches us how God views humanity as they take care of what He gives them. The point of the parable is that we will be held accountable not for what we produce, but what we do with what He gives to us. Then one of my favorite passages for parents is found in Psalm 127 and it says, “Children are a gift.”

What a cool metaphor. Our children are not ours. They are God’s. He created them and entrusts them to us as if they were arrows in our quiver.

Several years ago, I enjoyed my first bow hunt for elk.

I rifle hunt every year, but this was the first time I got to navigate the woods holding only a compound bow and four arrows. Through the day I took a few spills, but on the first day, after taking a short break on a log, I found myself pulling an arrow down on a cow elk from just twenty feet away. It had come up behind me and as the arrow was locked, I remember thinking, “No way, I’m actually going to get to fire one of these things!” As I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself, feeling the string and my thumb smoothly held next to my right cheek, I calmly and appropriately let go of the trigger.

“WHACK!” was the sound I heard, and with a strong stinging sensation on both my face and on the back of my left hand, I opened my eyes with a strange sense that “this did not feel or sound right.” Sure enough, the elk was still standing there looking at me and as I scanned his entire body, I realized there was no arrow sticking out of it. In fact, there was no arrow anywhere. Then I looked at my bow and realized that the string had broken and the loose shards had left bloody lines on my cheek and hand. Apparently on one of my falls in the rock pile, that cantilever had broken.

Now you animal lovers will love this story as the elk won the battle, but it still illustrates the reality of biblical parenting. Our jobs are not to own the arrows. Life has so many turns and twists, we don’t have any guarantee that all the arrows will come out and fly true. Surely, there will be some misfires and injuries, but God isn’t going to hold us accountable for success. He’s only going to hold us accountable for how we cared for and send off our children.

You can’t have a mission without an altar

The first family of mission was Abraham's family. God asked Abraham to leave his country and family and head out on an unknown mission of becoming the family by whom the entire world would be blessed. Now that's a mission that will keep you up at night staring at the ceiling!

As with many visions parents get, some time elapses between the big call and it actually happening. Abraham and his wife Sarah are now up in age and God miraculously helps them conceive a son named Isaac. Isaac's name actually means "laughter" based on the response Sarah gave when she found out she was pregnant. But with most names God directs parents to give their kids, it often forms the personality of their children. This little guy was probably a hilarious, whimsical little fellow that brought joy to the old couple. Not only would he be the one whose lineage God would use to bless generation after generation, but he was a lot of fun to have around the tent as well.

In a strange twist, God calls Abraham to sacrifice his son. Maybe you could imagine yourself processing this request. Just do the math. If God takes my son, then I have no lineage, thus God's plan and mission is nullified, won't happen. As we'll talk about later, God's mission for our families is an inspiring idea and we all love the thought that our legacy could affect the world, but it just doesn't happen without some struggle, some doubt, some things not making sense.

Somehow Abraham wasn't doing the math that morning. Somehow he held out hope against what he saw and heard, and trusted God to pull a rabbit out of the hat somewhere.

So, he loaded up the small party of family and friends

and headed out for a three-day journey to the mountain to sacrifice his son. Each night, they would have had time around the fire pit, laying next to each other looking at stars, you know, doing what any dad loves doing with his son. And then, after Isaac fell asleep, Abraham out of severe confusion and tension, would go for a walk, stare up into the black unknown and weep, wonder, wish God's mission wasn't so costly.

Most of you know the story. Once on the mountain, Abraham made an altar, bound his son on bundles of kindling that Isaac helped him gather, and then readied a dagger to plunge into the heart of all his hopes and dreams . . . his boy.

Just then, God saves the day, asks Abraham to put the knife down and Abraham learned the most important lesson in having a missional family. The first thing you have to do is give your kids back to God.

God owns us, our kids, and our calling, and growing a family that will serve God to the fullest begins with us putting our children back on the altar and trusting God with their future. To Steward their precious lives means we must let go!

Owners try to grow their kids in their own likeness. Godly stewards grow their kids in the likeness of Jesus. And for them to cleave to Jesus, we must get them ready to leave us.

The right questions

As you examine your own parenting style, are you preparing your children to take ownership or are you in a constant state of “over-control?”

Is there any possibility that you are living out your own dreams through your children? If so, how might you begin to lessen the pressure on them?

What is the altar for you? In other words, what is God asking you to kill right now regarding your own life or that of your children?

Chapter 3: Chivalrous Vision—For Love of the King and His Kingdom

“If I were to say that God sent me, I shall be condemned, but God really did send me.”

This quote was from Joan of Arc in the 1400s. Joan grew up in France and spent much of her formative years working the prosperous farm with her father. During The Hundred Years’ War with the British, the peaceful days on the farm spinning wool were often interrupted by tragic events with English soldiers. Once, English soldiers burned the village church and two other times Joan herded the livestock to safety from their marauding invasions.

As the story goes, when Joan was thirteen she was working in her father’s garden at noon. Suddenly, she saw a bright light and heard a voice. The voice called her “Joan the Maid” and told her to live a virtuous life. The voice continued and she began to believe that God was calling her to help the French gain victory over the British. Although just a lass, she asked her cousin to help her get a hearing with the local lord Robert de Baudricourt. He thought it silly and said, “Give her a good slapping and

take her back to her father.” Joan never gave up and within the year was leading a band of knights over 300 miles across enemy territory to help in the Battle of Orleans.

Though not the commander of the troops, she led hundreds of men in taking a number of forts that surrounded Orleans. During the battle for the fort of Les Tourelles, Joan was wounded (an arrow through the shoulder) but quickly returned to the fight, and her fortitude inspired many French commanders to maintain the attack until the English capitulated.

Then as an eighteen-year-old, Joan was captured. Here are some of the recorded questions and responses from her trial.

Question: Do you know if you are in the grace of God?

Joan: If I am not, may God place me there; if I am, may God so keep me. I should be the saddest in all the world if I knew that I were not in the grace of God. But if I were in a state of sin, do you think the Voice would come to me? I would that every one could hear the Voice as I hear it. I think I was about thirteen when it came to me for the first time.

Question: Which did you care for most, your banner or your sword?

Joan: Better, forty times better, my banner than my sword! One life is all we have and we live it as we believe in living it. But to sacrifice what you are and to live without belief, that is a fate more terrible than dying.

At nine a.m. on May 30, 1431, nineteen-year-old Joan walked toward the market square. She knelt and prayed for her enemies, and then was burned at the stake. As the flames leapt up, Joan asked for a cross to be held before her. Gazing upon it, her final word was Jesus.

In 1920, Joan was remembered by the Roman Catholic Church for her heroism and devotion far more than her military and political conquests and was canonized a saint.

I took some time to tell you the story of this thirteen-year-old girl that changed the history of Western Europe because I want you to believe in Vision. Vision that God has for your young men and visions he has for...YES, your young ladies. Many of the greatest leaders in the world have been under the age of twenty during the height of their influence upon culture, and if I can inspire you with the life of a prepubescent French girl, you'd better believe you can catch a vision for each of your children. Even if you don't, God does.

Chivalrous vision of love for the king

Vision is the ability to see what God sees. It was the gift God gave Daniel and the other prophets and it is only God's vision for your children that can pull their head up from the Xbox and Wii to find a reason to live.

The type of vision I want you to consider is a chivalrous vision. Chivalry is a term related to the medieval institution of knighthood. It is usually associated with the ideals of knightly virtues, honor, and courtly love. Simply put, chivalry is a code of arms or a life lived by principle of one thing—that is, love of King and the King's Kingdom.

I have done a lot of weird things in my life, and

hundreds, dare I say thousands, of things I lament, but here are a few I'm actually proud of:

- During a paint job, I missed a one-inch section underneath a roof eave. While driving home it really bugged me, so I turned around, got the ladder off my truck, opened up another paint can, and went up where no one would ever see it, and painted the one-inch square section.

- I found a short golf course pencil under my car seat. Realizing I had taken it by accident, I drove back to the golf course and gave it back. I think it was worth a penny.

- I decided to keep myself sexually pure before marriage.

- Since my first paper route in third grade, I've always given 10% of my income to God.

- I've physically put myself in harm's way to defend racial attacks, drunken abusive tirades, or the neighborhood bullies more times than I care to remember.

- I worked three weeks without pay on a paint job I auctioned off to help raise money for a local church. I thought it would be a normal two-day job, but the house was the size of Utah and they wanted it hand-painted!

- I pick up garbage that I see other people discard.

Why do I brag on myself? Simple. I want to brag on Jesus. As I look at these examples and think of many others, deep within my heart I only took the high road because of my love of Jesus. In each situation, there was a vivid moment of mental clarity where I remember thinking, "Jesus would want me to do this."

When we think about the world in which our children will grow up, all the pressures to take the low road that they will face, all the people surrounding them who will

not make choices that reflect the nature of God, the only hope we have is that they will be anchored, informed, and inspired to live large kingdom lives because of a simple love they have for Jesus.

Paul, who endured incredible struggles for his faith, made this clarion call to us all, “For the love of Christ compels us” (2 Corinthians 5:14). So simple and yet so profound. Moral training is helpful, but usually fails in time. Doctrinal or theological beliefs are important, but they don’t carry the day. Love, however, can sustain a person through the thickest pressure.

So the vision we help our children find must be rooted in love for Christ alone. I do hope my children want to please Cheryl and I, but as we prepare them for the big, dark world, love of Jesus must trump love of anything else.

Apprenticing the whole Jesus

This is probably a good time to talk about “discipleship.” It’s a word most Christian parents know, and generally we understand it to mean “teaching our children or our friends, or any convert for that matter, the truths of scripture, the doctrine and theology of God, and establishing the moral codes of the faith.” All this is good, but only if we understand the fuller meaning of Jesus’ idea of what a disciple is. When he used the word, he actually meant what we might call an “apprentice.”

Here’s an example I often use from my life. As a house painter for twenty years, if I wanted to model evangelical Christian forms of discipleship in my business, I would hire a young man, pay him a small wage, and ask him to

observe me painting for a summer. If he casually watched me from his seated position on the back of my tailgate for three or four months, he could probably explain some correct concepts about house painting to a friend. But if I want to make an apprentice of this young man, I'd have to call him off the tailgate, give him absolutely every tool I had, and help him learn every aspect of actually painting. He'd have to get dirty, deal with his fears, take responsibility, and so on. Discipleship, in other words, is satisfied when a person knows concepts about God, but apprenticeship isn't satisfied until the person has learned to live the life of God.

This is a simple but profound switch in thinking for several reasons.

First, God is going to hold us accountable on the level of apprenticeship. Especially with regard to our children. More specifically, God wants us to form not just doctrine, theology, and moral codes in our kids. He wants us to form the very life of Jesus in them.

Second, apprenticeship puts the onus on the parents, not the pastors or youth pastors. Pastoral staff can disciple your kids, but the one who is designed to spend the most time and who can actually model the life of Jesus is YOU! So they won't love Jesus, the king, or his kingdom unless they see you selling out for him.

Third, discipleship tends to create Pharisees whereas apprenticeship creates kingdom citizens. It's a strange concept, but Jesus actually warned his apprentices to watch out for the "leaven of the Pharisees." The leaven was the doctrine-focused spiritual fervency that naturally extracted them from truly loving people. Jesus didn't come to belittle

them or suggest that scriptural knowledge and moral living was bad, but he came to fulfill, enlarge, and expand what true spiritual formation was. He came to model a holistic life where doctrine, theology, knowledge, and morality were coupled with love, mercy, faith, and action.

Lastly, and most importantly, Western non-participatory discipleship tends to shrivel the heart, whereas active apprenticeship actually helps Jesus come alive in the heart, and that's what causes them to LOVE their king.

Paul summed up the power of kingdom apprenticeship this way and it should be goal of every parent, "That Christ be formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). That is the whole life of Jesus:

The mind of Jesus and how he viewed people and his calling to be faithful to the Father.

The heart of Jesus that broke over the things that broke the Father's heart.

The character of Jesus that protected him and gave him street cred with people.

The mission of Jesus which gave him purpose for his life.

In the appendix I've outlined some scripture and qualities that fit these four categories of apprenticeship.

As you look at these, maybe you'll realize some gaps in how many Christian parents view the spiritual development of their children. The rest of this book is designed to help you in all four areas, but we must say up front that the biggest issue is about holistic development. In other words, all parents want the character of Christ, the heart of Jesus, or mind of Jesus to be developed, but not the life or mission of Jesus. The character is safe, but to be honest if

your children get the heart of Jesus, they may choose to live a life of service that makes you squirm. If they have the mind of Jesus or the live his life, they may not go after the American dream as many of us have. They may instead seek justice, live for the poor, put themselves in harm's way, all because they love Jesus.

So the gut check begins with us. Do you really want all of Jesus to be developed in your children?

Before you decide, consider this beautiful letter given to a family in our church.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Even though this is a sad time to go through (for us all), I thought I would share some things I've realized over the past few days to help encourage you guys at the start of your journey.

The other night I was talking to Meghan about how I was feeling about yawl's move, and I realized that you guys are my heroes. I never really recognized how much I look up to you both. And as I began sharing this with Meghan, I started crying. I cried because I became aware of the imprint you both put on my life. I'm overwhelmed with thankfulness, humility, and pride (the good kind) when I think about you both.

You guys will be talked about and looked up to as heroes and role models in Meghan and I's household for many years to come. Our

kids and their kids will know you guys for your willingness to drop everything you know to follow the Lord. I pray that I will have the guts to take a huge step of faith when and if the Lord calls me to. Just like you guys did.

So, I say that to say this: Don't quit honoring God with your story or impacting the Kingdom. It is pushing me and will continue to push me and other people for many years to come.

I love you both so much,

Joe

Chapter 4: Broken Tree

Tonight I took my twenty-one-year-old son Ryan to a basketball game. To be honest, I wasn't excited to go. I was pooped and wasn't in the mood for a loud gymnasium.

Ryan's team is a cornucopia of developmentally disabled people from fourteen to thirty years of age. Most have Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, or retardation. Some of them are cute, but most are severely impaired and watching them struggle to talk and walk, let alone play a functional game of basketball, is pretty tough on the heart.

Imagine the scene I am watching right now: Ryan is double dribbling the ball with both hands all the way down the court and no one is calling a violation. After he air balls from twelve feet, someone from the other team throws the ball back so he can try again. Another air ball. So this time, another kid takes the ball to Ryan and invites him to step a little closer while the other kids clear the lane so he can have a good shot. He shoots and the ball bounces around the rim, but falls to the side. All the kids pat him on the back and congratulate him for getting close. He smiles.

As the other team now comes back down the other way, a girl in a wheelchair is being pushed by another team

member. She has the ball in her lap. She grips it tightly but needs another person's help to hold her head up. The girl pushing her can hardly walk herself. She's straining to push forward, but her left leg just drags behind her. The young lady being pushed is drooling uncontrollably from the excitement of getting to play. They wheel her right under the basket and another team member asks her permission to shoot for her. He makes the shot and they all give her a hug as the shooter unassumingly runs back down to get ready for the next play. This goes on and on until every person gets some meaningful experience in the game. All the parents root for everyone and no one looks at the scoreboard because, no matter what the real score, the scorekeeper keeps the game even. No one is a loser, everyone counts, appearance or capacity mean nothing, everyone is dependent upon each other, no one is ashamed of failure, thankfulness for life is the one constant, and everyone can't wait to see each other next week because of the experience they just shared.

And although it's always hard for me to get excited about going, I always drive home feeling like a kid who just got invited to climb over the wall and look into heaven.

A beauty unseen

This is the chapter that initially gave me the idea for this book. Even though the rest of the book gives a pretty high vision for our children, I felt there needed to be some honest talk about the reality that so many families deal with. I call them Broken Trees.

I say trees because a church in Denver is called Broken Tree. They are a community of almost entirely broken families who struggle with developmentally disabled children. I'm not sure exactly why they named it that, but I love the metaphor it brings to mind for me. The scriptures speak of the family of God as oaks of righteousness and, in the context of Isaiah 61, God is prophetically speaking of family, his people, his church that would someday bring the blessing of God to the world. We're like a huge orchard or forest united together to change the world. And that forest includes some broken trees.

This may be shocking for you to hear, but most families have some sort of disability in the ranks.

The actual idea of "disability" is considered a secondary demographic, meaning the census bureau only counts Caucasians, African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics and others, so there is really no concrete statistic on the disabled population, hence this cause is not at center stage. Cornell came out with a study three years ago claiming Colorado's disabled population was 9.4%.

Now that just accounts for the physically or developmentally disabled. This doesn't include people broken by physical or sexual abuse, being children of divorced parents, being orphaned, drug or alcohol abuse, or poverty.

A little more of our story

I've already shared a little about Ryan. During the first six years of his life, he would average about ten seizures a day. Thankfully, a brain surgery cut those down to about one or two a day. Grand Mal seizures are the big

ones that cause him to contort, drool, flop around, make dreadful noises as he tries to breath, often turning blue from lack of oxygen, and then usually wetting himself after his body goes completely limp.

Early in our marriage, I worked as a house painter and a typical day would go something like this:

Seizures all night, maybe two to three hours of sleep, then off to paint at 5:30am. Home by 3:30pm, a quick shower, then Cheryl and I would have our daily 4pm coffee time. Usually it wasn't very exciting as I could barely hold my eyes open, but we managed to give each other at least thirty minutes of catch-up time. Then three to four nights a week we'd either have a community time, Bible study, or I'd head out for coffee with local brothers who were trying to follow Jesus. Then again that night, a few hours of sleep interrupted every couple hours by a violent seizure, then up again to repeat the cycle. Every thirty minutes had to be thought through carefully as sleep deprivation often had us babbling to ourselves.

Eventually after planting our first church, we began to feel a meltdown coming. There were too many dumb church squabbles, I was getting jaded and chalked it up to legitimate reasons or simple justification. But it was time for the Halters to come off the field of mission, be normal, recover, and hide out. Through all those years, often when circling a mall or going downtown, Cheryl and I would joke about wanting to finally get the "handicapped" sticker we had coming that would make life easier, at least for parking that is, but we never did.

Of course, Cheryl was always tougher than me and would hang in there like a child caught in a tree during

a flood. But Hugh Halter was done! I wanted to literally hang the handicapped sticker in my car, on my front door, and print a few t-shirts that said, “Leave me the hell alone, don’t ask me to lead anything, do anything, or care about anything. That goes for you too, God!”

So we did—I resigned, we moved a few hours south of Portland, and I decided our family had done enough for a God who was apparently too busy with world hunger to lend a small hand to a faithful servant up in Portland. Not sure if you’ve ever had thoughts like that . . .

I share a bit more about our lives because I want you to know that my hope and call for you to be a part of a missional family, to make difference in the world, isn’t an insensitive megaphone rant in your face. And for sure, it’s not a challenge that you might get from a pastor standing up on a podium calling the faceless crowd to “suck it up.” It comes from a man and his incredible wife who knows what it feels like but who have enough glimmers of divine beauty to encourage you forward. My hope is that you see that being a missional family isn’t just for those who have a functional family. It’s for the rest of us!

Life on the river

Every few months I get invited to game of poker with some local blokes. I’ve learned to plan on losing my twenty bucks every time. Yet, I keep going back because on occasion I actually win some hands, and just like a crappy golfer who gets so excited over hitting one or two good shots in an entire round that he can’t wait to go back, I have won some stunning, infamous games on what is called, “the

river.” This poker term denotes the last card that is turned over that you can use in your hand. In other words, there have been several times I’ve had a terrible hand but decided to stay in until the last card, and I get what is almost impossible to get, but is exactly what I need.

I know there are always those families that seem to get the best hand dealt to them. Sometimes I even wonder if God actually puts one in every neighborhood just to tick us off. You know, they have enough money, their grass is always green, and they have steak instead of hamburgers on the grill. Their kids are the jocks, the head cheerleaders, and they vacation in Cabo. You know. The perfect people. Some of them actually have the mom stay at home because they can live off one income, so the laundry’s always done, there’s always a home cooked meal waiting, and it seems as though life clicks along at a dandy pace.

And then there are those of us who get dealt what appears to be an unfair hand. We have to work two or three jobs, the medication cost’s a third of our actual income, it takes thirty minutes just to get the less functional members of the family in the car to go anywhere, we’re always behind on house duties, and we’re lucky if our kids actually get invited to anything, let alone a prom or dance or club.

If the second description at all gets at what you feel like, have you ever really stopped to ask, “How do I view the hand I’ve been dealt? Do I view it as a liability, a straight-jacket that limits my enjoyment of the full life? Do I view this as if God doesn’t care or that, even worse, He may not even be real—for surely a loving God wouldn’t wish this on anyone he loves?”

Many of those questions and thoughts were my own.

That is until a fateful day in New York.

George Reitz

On a fateful day just two weeks after 9-11, I was in Queens, New York training church leaders. As I chronicled in my first book, *The Tangible Kingdom*, I was on my last leg spiritually, physically, and emotionally. This week however would turn out to be the most important week of my life. I essentially was converted anew twice. One happened after a cute Irish waitress invited her friends to the bar and asked me to tell them the things about the kingdom I had told her, and seeing them love it! That night Jesus helped me find my heart for the lost again.

The other conversion happened the night before. Right before we went out, I was stopped by a man named George who was hosting our event. He was a tender Jewish man who was absolutely in love with Jesus. He was seasoned, war tested and loved by everyone, thus I respected him greatly. He asked, “How are you doing Hugh?” So thankful that a man like this would ask me, I thought, What the heck, and proceeded to dump two years of frustration on him. “George, I’m here physically, but I’m dead spiritually. I’m upset with God, he doesn’t speak to me anymore, and he doesn’t seem to want to help. My son is having so many seizures I don’t have any energy to paint houses, be a dad or husband, let alone a spiritual leader. I just don’t know how God expects me to serve him without fixing my son?”

George didn’t say anything. The sweet smile he had on his face while listening to me turned to a quivering lip. Tears began to roll down his cheeks, he bent over, knelt

down on his knees, bent over placing his head on the ground and as he put his hands on my feet, he began to pray.

“Father, Hugh is having a hard time trusting you because he’s tired. As he sees Ryan’s disability as a limitation, would you show him the beauty, the power, and the ministry that must now flow from his home, from his weakness, from his brokenness. May he see your power and freedom through their very real constraints.”

I actually don’t remember much after that. I don’t even remember giving George a hug or saying thanks. I think I was just caught up in that conversion moment. I had forgotten that God’s mission isn’t about all we do for God on the run, but that God’s mission flows from our normal life.

The beautiful thing about God’s missional people and missional families is that He not only makes room for the broken, but He assumes we are broken. Said another way, when you sign up your family to live for God’s purposes in the world, brokenness isn’t something that hinders mission—brokenness is the bedrock of mission.

Weakness is power

God’s world is most certainly an “upside down” paradox. What we think brings happiness seems to kill the soul and what we think hurts us is often critical to our growth. Likewise, there are many strong men in scripture who were weak. Goliath, Sampson, Pharaoh, and Herod to name a few. They looked strong on the outside but crumbled in critical situations, and God proved stronger. Then there were strong weak men like Paul. In 2 Corinthians 12:8, he

speaks of his desire to be rid of a physical impairment,

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Paul is setting the stage to help us as parents rethink how we view disabilities and brokenness of any kind. Something special happens when people are limited. There’s a strength that comes from God when we are frail. God’s power actually shines through our physical sicknesses, emotional instability, and mental anguish.

Getting more specific in regards to the ministry each family has, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12,

But we have this treasure [the gospel and ministry of reconciliation] in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so

that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

What a great picture. The death or the suffering of Jesus being carried and shown in our own physical bodies showing the life of Jesus to the world. Brokenness is not a hindrance to mission; it may even be a benefit to mission.

The real story of the Bible

Our church is called Adullam. Adullam was a cave where King David hid out in and where many people came to be with the other losers. Losers? I thought David was a stud! Well, yeah, he was until he slept with another man's wife and then killed her husband to cover it up. After that he lost everything and ran around in caves to avoid being killed by Saul and other pesky militias. Eventually, God began to reestablish him and met him in a cave called Adullam, which means "refuge." My favorite scripture says in 2 Samuel 22, "It's where the distressed, downtrodden, and in debt went . . . and they were blessed." Many believe all the mighty men we see later doing incredible exploits for their king were initially a band of losers we read about here.

One of my favorite scenes is after David is back in power. He's once again got everything and looks like the privileged family everyone expects a king to be. David asks if there is anyone in Saul's household who he can show kindness to. The answer is a young disabled boy by the name of Mephibosheth. During a period of war, the five-year-old boy was swiftly picked up and, while his nurse was fleeing, he was dropped and crippled. David had him brought to

the palace. He bowed before David and was clearly intimidated and felt unworthy to be before his late father Jonathan's best friend. "I am but a dead dog," he said. But David said told him that he would be eternally cared for and that he would eat every meal at his table.

This story foreshadows the bigger picture of the gospel. First, you see shame. Imagine this boy Mephibosheth the day David's marauders came to get him for the king. He surely knew that as a grandson of Saul who was David's archenemy, any knights from David's court would surely be there to either kill or hassle him. As this boy stumbled to the door, he most certainly would have felt the shame of his family's gaffs with David, but also the pure shame of being disabled.

Shame seems to be a normal emotion for most families with broken trees. Even though we feel bad, honesty requires that I tell you there are certainly times where the awkwardness of the disability is a embarrassing. Ryan's seizures haven't come at good times. Often they happened in supermarkets, ice rinks, on the pews in front of the church, or in crowded packed restaurants. On rare occasions, Cheryl and I have snuck out for a twenty minute drive to the ice cream shop only to return to find him laying in the middle of the road or face down in a pool of blood on a neighbors porch. Several times we even had people bring him to our home after finding him siezuring on the sidewalk. Their looks often said, "Nice job, parents." And our story isn't all that bad. Imagine hundreds of thousands of parents of autistic children who blurt out obscenities or guttural screeches every ten seconds, or the violently disabled who live in a mental cocoon of psychosis. You know why

you don't see too many of these families in church? It's just too shameful or at least that's how it looks and feels sometimes. It's just not worth the emotional effort to try to appear normal.

David's family dysfunction exposes the honesty of real life and points to God's ability to build his kingdom amidst all the chaos we live with. His redemptive purposes happen as He weaves His way amidst our unsolicited weaknesses, self-imposed dilemmas, brokenness of sin, physical limitations, and a cornucopia of distressed situations. His beauty is there, but you must look for it.

A beauty to behold

I've already shared the beauty of watching Ryan's basketball game, but there's another picture of beauty. It's Ryan's girlfriend, Hallie. Hallie was born with an undiagnosed impairment that allows her to do basic functions, but she and Ryan are perfectly matched and have found a sweet friendship and love. Like Ryan, Hallie has some bad seasons where days and weeks in the hospital are just part of survival. Just a few months ago, Hallie's brain was swelling, leaking, and doing all sorts of other things a brain shouldn't have to put up with. She was in a lot of pain, couldn't lift her arms above her shoulders, but still managed to text Ryan and ask him to come see her at the hospital. We all drove up together. On the way in, Ryan asked if we could stop at the hospital store and buy Hallie a card. Once inside, he couldn't settle for that. He ended up buying her a stuffed animal, balloon, and some other stuff, all with his own money. Once in her room, we all blushed as

we watched the two of them gently comfort one another. Ryan spoke so sweetly, knowing the pain she was in, and she in turn fought off the pain to thank him for coming. As we left, Cheryl whacked me across the arm and said, “You could learn a few things about nurturing from that kid.”

It’s hard to write this even now, not because it’s so sappy, but because it convicts me. You see, we often feel sorry for broken kids and broken families, and even more, we hope for and try to help families not be so busted up. But the reality is something you have to look for to see. Broken people exhibit God’s beauty more than the healthy ones do. I was convicted by Ryan’s generosity, sensitivity, and Hallie’s toughness. And I have been hundreds of times.

Watching kids with Down syndrome doesn’t have to be sad. If you’ve ever noticed, most seem to be quite happy, almost 24/7! Seeing kids push their friends in wheelchairs during a basketball game isn’t pathetic. It’s amazing. Getting to know parents who have spent their last dime buying medication, paying hospital bills, and items needed to keep their autistic child alive isn’t a waste of money. It shows the depth of where love will go. I could go on forever, but I hope you get the point. The disabilities we and our children have need to be seen for what they are—the beauty of Christ’s kingdom and being on mission for God is for the least of these.

Even as I’m writing this, I’m sitting at a local Panera restaurant. I’m looking through the window as a family just came through the front doors. The mom is pushing the husband who is in a wheelchair. Both arms have metal hooks and he’s got an apparatus that allows him to move a

lever that propels the motor on the wheelchair. His seven-year-old son is holding the door open. The mother is actually laughing because as the man drove his chair through the door, the Panera rubber doormat got wedged in the axle and he's just spinning rubber, not going anywhere. Instead of freaking out or angrily pushing him through, she and her son are smiling and she just jumped on the back of the rug. Now he's pulling her through the store like a jet ski pulls a surfer. Even though his disability is severe, somehow they are finding fun together as a family. Sure, this young boy is missing a lot from his dad, but he's also getting a lot and will someday be anchored in beautiful memories that will change the way he sees everything!

Here's a key to life to remember. Brokenness exposes grace. Just like David, brokenness has no purpose except when it is covered by a graceful King who redeems and offers a place at His table.

And a home full of struggle is the front line of mission. Believe me, many times Cheryl and I have been concerned about how open we can be with our family because of Ryan's severe needs. It's not an embarrassment, but there are those awkward thoughts, "What happens if Ryan has a seizure? Will his disability make it difficult or uncomfortable for people? Could it be too much for them to handle?"

I guess most of us would feel like this. In high school, my older sister was in the deepest part of her schizophrenia, and there were days my friends would be over and Heidi would be hallucinating about grizzly bears chasing her. Even though my friends knew of her mental disability, the discomfort of watching her run around the house, screaming, and hiding behind chairs, got so intense that I decided

never to invite friends over again. What high school student wouldn't make this decision?

But we all feel that pressure to have our homes in order when people come over and during a certain season of life and struggle, we often make the mistake of silently closing the doors to our home. I even notice that young families with their first newborn often seem embarrassed by the noises their offspring can make. Be it crying, sucking noises, or the occasional diaper blow out noise, many decide simply not to go out and not to let anyone in.

Well, here's a little encouragement to let life happen and recognize the beauty in all this.

It may also be the only real solace to realize that someday we'll see all this through a lens of ultimate beauty. The scriptures say in Romans 8:28 that "all things work out for good." Good means perfection. I imagine someday, in the heavenly sphere, Cheryl and I will see Ryan in his perfected state. He'll be masculine, strong, have a more powerful voice and he'll look similar, but he'll be the way God intended him to be. Hallie's parents will see her, beautifully adorned with the perfection of Christ and they will understand their lives in context of God's purposes. They will smile knowing God's grace sustained them and they'll be proud that their lives exposed God to us. And we'll understand finally how and what God did through their brokenness.

That moment with George was life changing for me. To realize that we are all dealt a certain hand, and certainly, eventually it includes people that are not perfectly whole or functional, AND that God has a unique way of fashioning his story from our story. From that moment on, I

stopped trying to fix everything. I began using our home, inviting people into our lives, and years later two churches have been started, hundreds of people have sat on our back or front porch, living or pub room, and we've been able to pour our lives into theirs. And Ryan, he's been right in the middle of it all.

The right questions to ask

Look at the hand you were dealt. What can you thank God for? Where can you begin to ask God to show his strength and mission through?

Do you know any broken trees? How can you help them? How might you grow if you learn from them?

Consider true beauty through brokenness. Have you been harboring any bitterness with God for the limitations in your life?

How might God grow you and your children if you really press into the broken trees?

Conclusion

Well, I hope this short book has been an encouragement to you in your missional quest. As I write this final page, my daughter Mckenna is just two weeks away from going to Uganda. Even though I've tried to give you courage, I have deep reservations and concerns, even fears, for her time there. But I also have a hope, a prayer, and huge faith for what God will do in her life, both in protecting her and in growing her. That is the tension of true mission for ourselves and our kids. The gospel is worth our very best effort and since our children represent our greatest treasure, we can entrust them to this great cosmic venture.

As you move from concept to practical, let me make a few suggestions.

- Consider using this book to encourage and then recruit a handful of families to take a year long journey with you. Start with a two-month read through and when it's over, let them know you have a plan for family engagement. Another book I wrote for families is called *Sacrilege* and this would be a great community read as well.

- Commit to going through our Missio Primers as an intentional path forward. The first is called *The TK Primer* (eight weeks long) and it will help set the rails for what missional community is. The second is called *The Barefoot Primer* and is another eight weeks in finding and caring for needs in your community. The final one is called *The Gospel*

Primer (another eight weeks) that will help you dive deeper into how to understand, live out, and speak of the gospel. All three eight-week experiences are geared for families. You can find out about these resources at www.missio.us or www.missiopublishing.com.

May God bless you and your family,
Hugh Halter

Hugh Halter

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