



LOVING YOUR ADULT CHILDREN

*The Heartache of Parenting
and the Hope of the Gospel*

GAYE B. CLARK

“Our friend Gaye Clark has written a wise book on a weighty topic—long-term parental love. With engaging illustrations and biblical examples, Clark helps us care for our adult children more meaningfully. And even better, she helps us look to our Father God as we love our adult children. We—and they—are not alone in this journey.”

Ray and Jani Ortlund, President and Executive Vice President,
Renewal Ministries

“There are precious few resources to help guide parents in the launch phase of their parenting years. As a father of a child in college and three more soon to follow, I am thankful for the wisdom of this book. Being a mom or dad to an adult child is complicated and fraught with potential landmines. With experience, biblical wisdom, and grace, Gaye Clark helps families move into this new season of life. You will want this book in your library.”

Daniel Darling, Director, The Land Center for Cultural
Engagement; author, *A Way with Words*; *Agents of Grace*; and
The Dignity Revolution

“We never stop being parents, but what does parenting look like when our children are grown? Gaye Clark’s book, *Loving Your Adult Children*, is a gospel-saturated, grace-infused, and Christ-exalting look at parenting adult children. She points our gaze to the one who loves our children best. As a parent on the cusp of being an empty nester, I needed this book. You will too.”

Christina Fox, counselor; speaker; author, *Like Our Father*:
How God Parents Us and Why That Matters for Our Parenting

Loving Your Adult Children

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the Hope of the Gospel*

Gaye B. Clark

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Loving Your Adult Children: The Heartache of Parenting and the Hope of the Gospel

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*This book is dedicated to Carolyn Alcorn Clark.
Thank you for teaching me how to love my adult children.*

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Introduction

Children and Their Parents

Long nights battling colic. Finagling a sick child to take his medicine—and not throw it up. Crawling out of the store with a screaming toddler because he did not get the toy he demanded. Changing the messy diaper of an eighteen-month-old acrobat who leaves you covered in poop.

Experiencing events like these while the radio played “You’re Gonna Miss This” was laughable, until we realized Trace Adkins told us the truth. We blinked, and it happened. They grew into adults.

What is an adult child? Isn’t the term itself a bit of an oxymoron? A simplistic answer might be an eighteen-year-old, or in some states, a twenty-one-year-old. For the purposes of this book, I will be discussing adult children as biological or adopted children of parents who are twenty-one years old and up, living outside the home, and financially independent from their folks. However, I use adolescents and adult children who still live in the home as illustrations as well. I acknowledge those who live under a parent’s roof are under a separate set of obligations from

those who do not. Yet, the twenty-four-year-old may have more in common with an eighteen-year-old than he might like to admit.

Becoming Adults

Becoming an independent adult is far more nuanced than some may think. A child may legally become an adult at eighteen, however, a certain part of the brain—the prefrontal cortex—isn't fully developed until he's closer to twenty-five. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for reasoning, planning, attention, and focus. It helps us control our emotions and facilitates our sense of judgment.¹ We also use it to understand and predict the consequences of our actions. When your teenage daughter is pulled over for going seventy miles an hour in a forty-five zone and says, "I don't know how this happened," she isn't completely off her rocker.

But when you give her consequences (and you should), you are helping her prefrontal cortex develop. Knowing this detail about her brain development might also keep you from rolling your eyes, at least a little.

While the twenty-four-year-old who is living on his own and the eighteen-year-old living at home are in different circumstances, they can both benefit from parental involvement. Wisdom on the parent's side is knowing how much involvement to have and when, especially where the twenty-four-year-old is concerned.

In this book we'll see how troubles that remain unresolved in childhood and adolescence can come calling as our children mature into adults. With grown or nearly grown adult children, it

1 Mariam Arain, Maliha Haque, Lina Johal, Puja Mathur, Wynand Nel, Afsha Rais, Ranbir Sandhu, and Sushil Sharma, "Maturation of the Adolescent Brain," *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment* 9 (2013): 449–61.

can be easy to despair and think it is too late to improve or repair our relationship with our kids, too late to communicate our love for them in a way they can hear and receive. But is anything too difficult for God?

This is a book for parents of adult children, and yet it may also benefit parents of younger children. It is not a book on how to parent *per se*. Rather, it is an invitation to renew your love for Christ and shows how that love can inform your parenting. Our vertical relationship with God is the single most valuable tool for enhancing our horizontal relationship with our children.

The Goal for Christian Parents

We are all broken vessels—sinners. We have all failed to live up to God’s perfect standards and need his mercy just as much today as the moment we came to Christ. His grace alone saved us, and we need to keep that in mind as we parent our children: he alone can save them, too.

When it comes to righteousness before God, we are not superior to anyone, including our kids. In the battle for their souls, we should be fighting not against our children but beside them. We fight a common enemy: sin and unbelief.

Christians don’t primarily raise their children to become fully functioning adults, although that is part of their task. Instead, their primary aim is to teach their children to place their hope in God alone through the finished work of Jesus Christ. It would be tragic to bring up a child who was able to obtain an excellent job, marry, and raise a beautiful family—become someone who was considered an upstanding member of his community—but does not have a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ, “for

what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36).

The Christian parent of an unsaved adult child has the same mission. He continues to pray and point his adult child to Christ as he is given opportunity. Since none of us know God’s exact plan for our children’s lives, we can pray, press on, and when weary, lean on our brothers and sisters in Christ. We should not feel like a failure, for none of us know God’s timing in salvation, even when it comes to our kids. His plans and purposes extend far beyond our desires.

Overall, God gives sinful moms and dads the difficult task of bearing witness to the salvation that can be found in Christ, trusting him completely with the outcome. This gives parents reason to cry out to God for the grace needed to refine their own hearts first before they seek to reprove their children. Part of evangelizing their kids is modeling what repentance looks like in their own walk with Christ. “First tak[ing] the log out of [their] own eye” (Luke 6:42) would be a great place to start.

In short, *Loving Our Adult Children* uses key components of the gospel (faith, repentance, forgiveness, and grace) as well as the fruit of the Spirit to enhance your relationship with Christ and, as a result, strengthen the bond with your adult child. It is my hope this book will point both you and your adult child to an everlasting love, an everlasting hope: Jesus Christ.

Faith

WHERE DID THE TIME GO? This quintessential question grips us and messes with our emotions. One car brand captured this feeling perfectly in a commercial that featured a little blond-haired boy who packs up his belongings and puts them into the back of the family car.¹ His faithful puppy tags behind. The boy returns to his room for another load. Something feels strange here. His dad, looking out into the hall from a bedroom, raises an eyebrow when he notices an oversized box making its way down the stairs. Then he sees his son juggling the massive package and struggling to keep it upright.

“Buddy, you need some help?”

“No. I’m good.”

A family photo catches the boy’s eye. He stops, adds it to the box, and then heads for the car. As I watch, the knot in my gut

1 Subaru of Englewood, “2017 Subaru Impreza, Subaru Commercial, Moving Out,” YouTube Video, <https://www.youtube.com/>. All quotations in this section are from this source.

tightens. In the garage, Mom clutches a stuffed animal she found in an old chest full of toys. She rummages through the other treasures.

“Hey, do you want these?”

“Why don’t you keep those, Mom?”

He drags a blanket to the car, but his dog pulls it back toward the house. The boy tugs the blanket in return. “Come on, Moe. I have to go.”

Where is this little fella going, and why don’t his parents stop him? His folks join him at the car; an open trunk obscures the view. When Dad shuts the trunk, he and his wife have aged fifteen years. They turn to hug their son, who has transformed into a young adult. The young man then stoops to pet his beloved old dog. “See ya later, Moe.”

The narrator, voice tender with emotion, says, “We always trusted our Subaru would be there for him someday. We just didn’t think someday would come so fast.”

The vehicle pulls away from the drive, his parents hold each other as they watch the car drive out of sight, and the word “love” closes out the one-minute spot. Cue the tissues because we’re all a mess just watching.

Hidden Idols

No pain grabs us quite like parental pain. It seizes our hearts as we raise our children, but more so as they embark on the grand adventure called adulthood. We roll back the video of our kids’ childhood, smile at the happy times, and, if we’re honest, wince at things we regret. Some of us even weep. Is it too late?

Through tears, this is what I’ve heard parents say: “He’s all I’ve got,” “If I lost my daughter, you’d have to just put me in

a mental institution,” “He’s my heart and soul,” and “They are everything to me.”

When you have a healthy relationship with your adult children, all can seem right with the world. Research has borne this out—“young adults and their parents perceiving their relationship as good has been associated with low psychological distress and high life satisfaction.”² But parents and adult children don’t always agree on the state of their relationship.

Parents may believe their relationship is healthier than their adult kids think it is,³ and this mismatch can blindside them when an adult child cuts off communication. One study found that “1 in 4 U.S. adults have become estranged from their families.”⁴ A *Journal of Marriage and Family* article reported that 11 percent of mothers ages sixty-five to seventy-five with two or more grown children were estranged from at least one of them.⁵ Clinical psychologist Dr. Joshua Coleman, who surveyed 1600 estranged parents, explained in an interview,

Ironically . . . estrangement happens because the adult child is in some ways too loved, too taken care of. And one of

- 2 Debra Umberson, “Relationships between Adult Children and Their Parents: Psychological Consequences for Both Generations,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 54, no. 3 (1992): 664–74.
- 3 Jane B. Lancaster, Jeanne Altmann, Alice S. Rossi, and Lonnie R. Sherrod, eds., *Parenting Across the Life Span: Biosocial Dimensions*, 1st ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 1987), chap. 15.
- 4 Tamara Markard, “When the Ties that Bind Are Cut: The Silent Epidemic of Parental Estrangement,” *Greeley Tribune*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.greeleytribune.com/>.
- 5 Megan Gilligan, J. Jill Suitor, and Karl Pillemer, “Estrangement Between Mothers and Adult Children: The Role of Norms and Values,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77 (May 2015): 908–20.

the consequences of a much more intensive, anxious, guilt-ridden, worried, involved parenting that has been going on in the past three or four decades is that sometimes adult children get too much of the parent, and they don't know any other way to feel separate from the parent than to estrange themselves.⁶

Getting too much of a parent—resulting from what is referred to as “helicopter parenting” and identified by a lack of boundaries—is the most common (but certainly not the only) reason adult children distance themselves from their parents. Yet how could caring—or caring too much—for the children God gave us be wrong? Christian counselor Christina Fox writes, “There is a fine line between doing all the necessary things to care for and raise our children and making all that we do be about them.”⁷ Our outward behavior has an inward motivation. And it all goes back to what or who we treasure.

Worship God Alone

Who are we supposed to treasure? More specifically, who are we to treasure the most? The psalmist writes, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing [and no one] on earth that I desire besides you” (Ps. 73:25). Could desires for our children actually be a turning away from this kind of worship, an idolatry?

6 Rebecca Rashid and Olga Khazan, “Parents Are Not All Good and Bad,” *Atlantic*, June 6, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

7 Christina Fox, *Idols of a Mother's Heart* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2018), 105.

Tim Keller defines idolatry as

anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything that you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would hardly be worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources on it without a second thought.⁸

Fox offers a similar definition of idols as turning to another source for “things only God can provide.”⁹

Overall, parents need both the truth of God’s word and his love to care for their kids without making them an idol. If we point our kids to Christ as we raise them, we will reinforce our primary devotion to God as we offer our children life-giving love and care. Some parents think they can teach their kids the gospel by simply taking them to church. But it isn’t just the church who will give an account before God concerning the care of children—it is primarily mom and dad.

So how are parents doing in this area? What kinds of regular conversations are they having about Jesus with their kids? Do children know how their parents came to Christ? Do children know how God is working in their parents’ lives now? Are parents willing to share some of the mistakes they’ve made and how God’s

8 Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), xix–xx.

9 Fox, *Idols of a Mother’s Heart*, 56.

grace transformed them? Far from making them appear weak in their kid's eyes, conversations like these can strengthen the bond between parent and child. These conversations empower parents' faith in God because they remind parents that they are flawed vessels, dependent on the Lord to accomplish anything redemptive.

Model Empathy

A friend, Russel, expressed frustration because his son made careless errors in math that could have easily been avoided if he had only double-checked his work. His son, who tended to rush through many things, didn't seem convinced that looking over his work would make a significant difference in his grade, let alone a difference in life outside of math class.

Around that time, Russ's family had to postpone a long-anticipated family vacation. The reason? When balancing his checkbook, Russel had made a math error several weeks earlier. He added an entry that should have been subtracted. When he finally caught the error the following month, several hundred dollars he thought he had saved for the vacation just weren't there.

He decided to use his own mistake to help his son. With tears in his eyes, he said, "It's my fault we must postpone our vacation."¹⁰ He explained his error and how he'd forgotten to double-check his work. "This is just one area where math will matter outside of class, son." Without any lectures or ultimatums, his son's efforts in math improved. Sometimes we can more effectively point out our child's shortcomings by using empathy instead

¹⁰ All quotations in this chapter and following that do not have citations are from the author's personal experience.

of condemnation. Loving God first includes bringing children “up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4), but discipline isn’t always negative. It can also mean affirming our children when they do right.

Eyes to See the Good

When a mom came by to speak with me about her adult son, she said, “He won’t talk with me.” I happened to know both her and her son well. Mom was a demanding parent who had unrealistic expectations of her children. I asked her, “When was the last time you affirmed your son about anything he said or did? Even the smallest thing would do.” She told me she didn’t know of anything positive to praise. Ouch. No wonder her son refused to speak.

When we are angry with our kids or feel disappointed by them, it can be hard to see the positive. We need to pray for God to give us eyes to see past our frustration and annoyance. Sometimes amazing gifts hide amid the mess.

Historians call Benjamin West one of the great masters among American artists. His paintings line the halls of museums in America and Great Britain. In 1745, when he was seven years old, his mother asked him to look after his baby sister, Sally. When his sister fell asleep, he gathered his ink, paintbrush, and paper and began to work. His tools were homemade and weren’t neatly contained in airtight containers or ziplock bags. Ink spilled everywhere.

His mother’s return startled him. She surveyed the mess in front of her, but she was able to see beyond the obvious chaos of a child’s unsupervised creativity. She picked up Benjamin’s “masterpiece”

and said, “Why, it’s Sally!” and kissed him.¹¹ Benjamin West later remarked, “My mother’s kiss made me a painter.”¹² Benjamin West’s mother could have scolded her son and unwittingly frustrated his budding talent. But she didn’t. Instead, she had eyes to see the good.

Don’t Exasperate Your Children

In that same verse in Ephesians where Paul speaks of discipline and instruction he writes, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children” (6:4 CSB). Most dictionaries define “exasperate” as having strong feelings of irritation or annoyance. It builds up slowly over time with this significant wrinkle of misery: when we are exasperated, we feel as though there isn’t anything we can do to alleviate the circumstance.

Consider a teenager who said the loaded phrase, “But I can explain!” to which his mom raised her hand and said, “I don’t want to hear it. I’ve listened to your nonsense too many times before.” Mom had heard his share of excuses. But parents aren’t mind readers. She *didn’t* know what her son was going to say that day. He might have been about to give another lame excuse, or this might have been a different circumstance entirely. Unless mom was clued in by a dependable eyewitness, she ought to have at least heard him out. But she opted to cut him off instead.

And the son? He concluded that his mom not only refused to listen but also didn’t care. That’s exasperation. Over time, it can boil over into fury.

¹¹ Richard W. Leeman, ed., *African American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 176.

¹² Leeman, *African American Orators*, 176.

Parents exasperate their kids when they focus only on rules (or personal preferences) above their relationship with God or overdiscipline their kids in the name of holding them accountable. One way these can happen is when parents misunderstand their child's developmental capabilities associated with his current age and place unreasonable expectations on him because they believe he is "wise beyond his years." It's possible for any child to display extraordinary wisdom in a given circumstance, but all of us need time to grow up properly in Christ.

Children can also become exasperated if their parents underdiscipline them. These parents could be blind to their child's behaviors or simply have no idea how to address a particular behavior. As a result, their children grow up having no idea where the boundaries lay. This isn't an exhaustive list, but one can begin to consider ways parents might exasperate their children.

Of course, Paul's words in Ephesians do not mean that a parent must never make his children mad. Children (and adults, for that matter) don't especially like being told no, even if it is for their own good. Sometimes children will be angry because their parents are being godly parents. Further, when dealing with adult children with an exceptionally long history of self-absorbed behavior, blame-shifting answers for their actions, there may come a time when it would be wise to no longer be willing to hear them out until you see evidence of repentance. Yet, this action shouldn't be taken in the heat of frustration but only after serious prayer and seeking appropriate counsel.

Don't Lose Heart

Navigating a balance between allowing our children the freedom to grow and flourish while at the same time disciplining them when necessary is not for the fainthearted. Parents of an adult child may feel they have done all these things to the best of their ability but their son still isn't walking with the Lord. They are devastated when they hear him speak as confidently of his unbelief as they do about their Savior. Where is their hope now?

In Habakkuk 2, God assures the prophet, "the vision awaits its appointed time. . . . If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay" (Hab. 2:3). Sometimes parents will have to white-knuckle their fingers around the promises of God's word and not let go. They must keep trusting a loving and merciful God to order the ways of their child. In so doing, they remind themselves that they worship the Lord, not their children.

Later in this book, you will read a mother's story who kept bringing her son before the Lord and almost drove her pastor crazy—yet never wearied her God. The fruit of her prayers benefited not only her son but thousands of Christians for centuries afterward.

Be about discovering the mercies of God. Scripture says his mercies are "new every morning" (Lam. 3:23). Every morning pursue them—to your last breath. Lost children can still come to Christ after the death of a parent. We must keep our eyes fixed first and foremost on God, not our adult child.

Hidden in Plain Sight

We know better than to place our children in a position where only God should be, but has that exchange perhaps taken place

without our knowledge? Like the hidden fees on my cable bill, idols have a way of creeping into our lives and costing us more than we know. Where our children are concerned, idols can be years in the making. When we think of idols, we might think of evil gods such as Molech, a Canaanite deity associated with child sacrifice in the Old Testament (Lev. 20). When we consider idolatry, the hideous transformation of the hobbit Sméagol to Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy comes to mind. But Satan can be more subtle with false gods and worship.

If we have idolized our children, one occasion God may use to reveal our idolatry to us is when our children sin. When we're angry because an adult child is dating someone outside our beloved church denomination, are we just as angry about what is going on inside our hearts? Is our concern unadulterated zeal for the Lord, or are we angry that our kid's behavior smashed to pieces our image of a perfect family?

If our kids fail us, it can be difficult not to take their failure personally. How about if they disrespect us? That *is* personal. And what if they opt for something we do not approve of but isn't sin? Paul Tripp writes about one aspect of treating our children as idols when he says,

We begin to need [our children] to be what they should be so that we can feel a sense of achievement and success. We begin to look at our children as our trophies rather than God's creatures. We secretly want to display them on the mantels of our lives as visible testimonies of a job well done. When they fail to live up to our expectations, we find ourselves not grieving for them, but angry at them, fighting against them, and, in

fact, grieving for ourselves and our loss. We're angry because they've taken something valuable away from us, something we've come to treasure, something that has come to rule our hearts: a reputation for success.¹³

Loving God for Himself

Idolatry sometimes manifests as misplaced love. One of my favorite people in the Scriptures is Leah, the ugly girl who no one wanted. Leah's father, Laban, pawned her off to Jacob in marriage with a bait-and-switch scheme as if she were a cheap consolation prize on *Let's Make a Deal*. I can't imagine the mixed emotions Leah must have felt on her wedding day, her face heavily veiled, seeing a beaming groom but knowing he was thinking of her sister.

Leah's sham wedding and honeymoon lasted only a week before Laban allowed Jacob to marry Rachel as well. Leah would live the rest of her married life as an unwanted spouse. But when the Lord saw Leah was unloved, he opened her womb and closed Rachel's. So Leah tried to heal the searing wound in her heart with children. She named her firstborn Reuben, meaning "to see." She hoped God would open her husband's eyes to her worth through this new baby, saying, "Now my husband will love me" (Gen. 29:32).

Only he didn't. My heart breaks every time I read those words. I've known moms who had children with this misguided hope that the babe would heal the marriage. But the parents who despair of their marriages and now focus solely on a grown child harm both themselves and their children. Often these children grow up to become adults who complain that their parents have never

¹³ Paul Tripp, "The Idol of Success," *Paul Tripp Ministries* (blog), May 3, 2013, <https://www.paultripp.com/>.

learned boundaries and pry into areas of their lives where they were not invited.

Leah had another son named Simeon, which means “hear.” Would Jacob listen? No. Then a third came, Levi, meaning “attach.” Finally, Leah hoped, her husband would connect to her in a deeper way. But he did not.

Yet, Leah was no quitter. She redoubled her efforts with each pregnancy. She may have been struggling but she hadn’t quit talking to God and seeking to understand where he was in her circumstances. At Reuben’s birth, she rejoiced “because the LORD has looked upon my affliction” (29:32). With Simeon’s birth, she had claimed, “the LORD has heard that I am hated” (29:33). She persisted.

Remember Tim Keller’s definition of idolatry: “Anything that you seek to give you what only God can give.”¹⁴ Leah was hoping to get her husband’s love and attention through her children. But even if her plans had proven successful, Jacob was woefully inadequate to give her what her heart truly longed for. No spouse or child can fulfill our deepest needs. Only God can do that.

A fourth son Leah named Judah, which means “praise.” This time, she did not mention her husband. No; she said, “This time I will praise the LORD” (29:35). At last, the goal wasn’t her husband’s love. She learned what it meant to rest in the love of God alone and found him satisfying. God had always seen her as beautiful. He had always heard her, and he was the God who would never leave nor forsake her. He alone was worthy of her praise.

¹⁴ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, xix.

What profound comfort Leah must have found in knowing this. Only God can heal the ache in our hearts when disappointments tempt us to turn to our children for things they can't give us.

Our Children Belong to the Lord

Hannah had similar circumstances to Leah's. Her husband's other wife, Peninnah, ridiculed her, not for her lack of beauty but because Hannah was barren. First Samuel tells us that Hannah's "rival [Peninnah] used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year" (1 Sam. 1:6–7).

Year by year. Many parents relate to trials that never stop. Hannah endured Peninnah's cruelty for years, taking her grief to the Lord in prayer. She asked him for a son. In return, she promised to "give him to the LORD all the days of his life" (1:11).

Did we read the passage correctly? She asked God for a son so she could give him back to God. Who would make that promise after years of infertility?

Hannah wanted a child—but not to shut Peninnah's mouth, remove the cultural shame, or satisfy a legitimate maternal desire. She wanted to bear a child who would live for the glory of God. Could Hannah trust God with her child? Yes. But she didn't get there overnight. God worked this surrender in Hannah through the years of suffering she endured. His plans were far greater than she could imagine. Thus, for Hannah, it was no longer about her desire alone but about God's plan working through her desires.

Scripture says that "in due time, Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked

for him from the LORD'” (1:20). Then, when Hannah weaned Samuel (around age three), she kept her promise and brought him to Eli the priest. She went up to the temple with her son and all his belongings and returned with empty arms.

She could have gone home in tears. Instead, in the next chapter of 1 Samuel we see a woman bursting forth with praise to God. Hannah made a holy transaction: she traded her heartaches and a hope centered on her world for God's plan, purposes, and kingdom. She meditated on God's attributes, character, and promises. She asked that her desires become molded to his plan.

As I read of Hannah bringing Samuel to Eli, my mind floods back to my son's wedding day. Weddings can be hard for the mother of the groom. My son, Nathan, made a vow to his beloved bride to love her above all others—which included me. That is how it should be, but parents can struggle to let go. As I watched my son and his bride pledge their love and fidelity to God and to each other, I prayed they would live to glorify God and I would take hold of the faithfulness of God. During this time of transition for us, I could trust God with these two precious lives. They'd always belonged to the Lord.

Do we see our adult children as belonging to us or the Lord? Often, we can find the answer as we retrace our steps and consider the state of our heart through their earlier years. Idolatry with our children can be seen when we make them the center of our world or expect them to give us something that only God can give. We can also see idolatry revealed in our hearts if we struggle to relinquish control of our children when it is time for them to leave us.

Every fall, parents load their minivans with their beloved college students along with their belongings and head to

campuses all over the country. They will come back with an empty vehicle after what is sure to be a longer drive home than it was there. For many, it's a bittersweet moment filled with tears and happy memories. But for some, it can be a very trying time. They had centered their entire world around their child, and now that child is gone. An empty nest, for these parents, means an empty heart. They just feel lost. Again, Keller's words on idolatry warn us: "should you lose it [an idol], your life would hardly be worth living."¹⁵ If this is your story, ask God to grant you repentance and open your heart to loving him alone as your God. There could be no better comfort for this kind of pain.

Restoring True Worship

Overall, part of why we are so prone to idolatry is that we think so little of Christ. When we do think of him, it might be a false Jesus we contemplate. In, Colossians, Paul speaks of the preeminence of Christ, unfurling the beauty of the incarnation and the image of God. This passage is worthy of your memorization because it captures Christ's essence as the visible representation of the invisible God. It says that Jesus

is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold

¹⁵ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, xx.

together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. (Col. 1:15–18)

“The firstborn of all creation” does not mean that Jesus is a created being. No; Jesus is the *heir* of all creation. He owns it all. And when you ponder his ownership, consider this: Jesus owned the wood and nails that created the cross that crucified him. He owned the real estate we know as Calvary. He owned the robe the soldiers placed on him to mock him. He owned the thirty pieces of silver the religious leaders gave to Judas to betray him.

In the next verses of Colossians, Paul gives further evidence that he does not mean Jesus is a created being when he writes that “by him all things were created” (1:16). If Jesus created all things, he could not have been created. Consider, too, the scope of creation: things “in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities” (1:16). Jesus created every square inch of anywhere we can imagine.

Further, “he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (1:17). I forget this when I leave the house with the weight of the world on my shoulders, thinking I am the one who must hold it together. Most mornings, I can’t even find my car keys.

What are you trying to hold together? What are you trying to control in the name of loving your adult son or daughter? And how is that working for you? When we ponder these verses on who Christ is—all that he owns, his power, glory,

and honor—we would be fools not to place our full confidence in him. We care for our horizontal relationships best when we nourish our vertical relationship with God first. When we rest in Christ alone, we can cry out to God instead of railing against our adult children about their sins or pacing the floor over how to fix what we cannot control. Christ alone can be the Savior.

Have you considered how magnificent your Savior is? How he longs to take from you the reins of control you cling to? Do you see what a superior God he is compared to the gifts he given you? Place your faith in him alone. You can trust him.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you feel like your children grew up fast? What experiences have made you most nostalgic for their younger years?
2. In what ways can our children become idols?
3. How can we love and care for our adult children without making them idols?
4. How can our emotions help us identify idols in our hearts?
5. Is letting go of your children difficult for you? How can meditating on the greatness of Christ help you let go?
6. What “impossible circumstance” can you relinquish control of in order to acknowledge Christ as the one true God who owns all things?

FAITH

7. Read Psalm 121. What question does the psalmist ask and what is the answer? List the truths that the psalmist proclaims about God. Why is knowing God essential to worshipping him?
8. How does understanding God's nature and work reorient your focus as a parent?