

DEAR UNBELIEVING CHILD, HOW I LONG FOR YOUR SOUL

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I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth. (3 John 1:4)

In this chapter, Eileen Scipione (my son, Joel's, mother-in-law) writes of her experiences with unbelieving children. Eileen and her husband, George, are godly parents who have experienced deep suffering at the current lack of faith of two of their five children.

Eileen's Story

I'm a Failure as a Mother

I once felt sure that I had been a bad mother. Two of my five children were not walking with the Lord, and as of the writing of this chapter that remains the case. In addition to this, another child was very troubled for years, due to a physiological ailment, although she is presently immensely better. Please don't get me wrong. I praise God with all my heart for the three who are strong in Jesus Christ, but the fact that our only son is in prison and our daughter is obsessed with making a career in Hollywood has challenged my faith exceedingly! For many days I've agonized over questions like *What happened? Where did I go wrong?*

Like you, I tried so hard to be the best mother I could possibly be. My parents reared me in the fear and nurture of the Lord. I figured if we loved our children, lived Christ in front of them, disciplined them, took them to church twice on the Lord's day and to Sunday school, had family worship regularly, home schooled, enrolled them in a Christian school, protected them from evil influences, read quality literature to them, provided homemade, natural foods and a nice house for them, and gave opportunities for sports and fun activities, then they would turn out as godly, productive citizens. I had the highest hopes that each one of our children would grow up to be on the front lines of Christ's kingdom. But at present, two of these precious gifts from the Lord are not even on the battlefield.

Our son, Paul, has been a jobless, homeless marijuana addict since high school, for eleven years now. Although he made a public profession of faith in Christ at age nine, his claim to faith now vacillates from Christianity to Islam to Rasta'farianism, depending on which group is providing his room and board. Having squandered the many athletic and cognitive gifts that God gave to him, he now imagines himself as a profound thinker and professional basketball player. Incarcerated more times than I can keep track of, usually for marijuana possession and probation violations, he views himself as suffering at the hands of a repressive government. One of the most heartbreaking facts of all is that I believe he is incredibly lonely, having barely connected emotionally with anyone throughout his childhood and up to the present.

The other wandering sheep, our daughter Nicole, is the polar opposite of Paul. Also making a public profession of faith at age nine, she seemed to embrace Christ with all her heart. We had no reason to doubt that profession until the last year of university, when she began

to express serious doubts about the veracity of Scripture. "I just can't believe that some of my friends, who happen to be homosexuals or non-practicing Jews, are going to hell. They are nicer than many Christians I know." That was five years ago, and since then she has not changed that opinion in the least, although she attends liberal churches sporadically and claims to "have a closer relationship to God than you could ever imagine."

Dear afternoon woman, by now you can understand why I once felt like a failure as a Christian mother. My guess is that some of you are where I once was. You have moments of despondency, depression, and hopelessness. You wonder if God will ever answer your prayers and pleadings for your child. Things only seem to get worse. Your hope grows dimmer and dimmer, until it is barely visible. Just when you see a light at the end of the tunnel, it goes out. I'll never forget the elation I felt when Paul entered boot camp and began to write letters home about how much he remembered the lessons of his boyhood. How much more bitter was the hurt and disappointment when a few weeks later he was discharged from the Marine Corps for using pot after boot camp was over. It seemed that it would have been better not to get my hopes up.

One of my most desperate moments came when our daughter Arielle, at age seventeen, was missing for six days, nowhere to be found. She suffered from neuro-psych Lyme disease, although she had not been diagnosed at that point. Only someone who has experienced something similar can comprehend the panic that goes through a parent's heart. God gave me an immense amount of peace throughout the entire nightmare of Arielle's battles with illness, rebellion, and mental confusion, but it was horrible for all of us nonetheless. Each time she crashed (returned to her violent, self-mutilating behavior after a week or so of calmness) my heart would cry out, *When, Lord, will this end? We can't take this anymore.*

One Sunday morning after church the feeling of being overwhelmed hit me like a tidal wave. Three of my five children were in major spiritual crises at the same time. If it weren't for the faithful prayer and support of my church family as well as my biological family, I know I would have lost my mind. There were times when I couldn't think even one clear thought; I had become so muddleheaded. One Sunday afternoon, twenty people responded to my invitation to join us at our home for prayer and fasting. It was God's provision of biblically thinking, compassionate brothers and sisters that kept me sane and functional.

Another heart-wrenching experience was Paul's first phone call from the holding tank at the county jail. Knowing that we would not bail him out, he appeared to simply want to hear my voice. I still break into sobs when I think about it. Sometimes I'll have a dream in which he is calling out to me, "Momma, Momma." Little lost lambs are especially hard on us mothers because we are often the nurturers in our homes. I'm not saying that the fathers are not deeply hurt, but they tend to be less emotionally expressive than we are.

I suppose the only points more wretched than this one were the days that Paul and Nicole were excommunicated from our church (once it fell on Mother's Day). Even though my husband and I had requested that church elders not delay too long in carrying out church discipline, it was nevertheless an incredibly humiliating and heart-tearing experience. Again, the body of Christ held me up before our Father in heaven, giving me the faith and strength to go on.

The picture I have painted thus far has been dismal indeed, although I am very aware of worse stories than mine out there (but they usually are not in families with such a strong

Christian background). I want you to have undeniably clear in your mind that what you are facing with your adult child is not uncommon.

God has chosen a goodly number of his saints to suffer under this burden. I could list respected, godly families in the present generation that have had rebellious children who didn't return to the Lord for decades. Franklin Graham is the most well-known example of this. In Tom Bisset's *"Why Christian Kids Leave the Faith,"*¹ he claims that research demonstrates that 90 percent of all prodigals come back to live dynamic Christian lives. Whether that statistic is accurate or not, our trust must be in a sovereign God who makes no mistakes.

We see in God's Word that Adam and Eve had their Cain, Aaron had Nadab and Abihu, Noah had Ham, Eli's sons were wicked, Isaac had his Esau, Samuel's sons were lawbreakers, David had Absalom, and the list doesn't end there. Most of these parents are considered to be godly people, but their adult children came to a heart-breaking end.

However, the encouraging stories of godly parents rearing godly offspring abound all the more. For every one of the seeming failures above, Scripture shows us God's grace in each of these families. Remember that Adam and Eve had two godly sons, Abel and Seth; Noah had Shem and Japheth, Abraham had his Isaac, Isaac had Jacob, and Jacob had Joseph. In the lives of Aaron and Samuel, David and Solomon, Eunice and Lois, God's grace is poured out in the lives of children.

Some of the believers I mentioned above, although reared by covenant-keeping parents, sinned grievously at some point in their lives; yet they were renewed to the covenant by the time their lives were ended.

As you consider the lists above, you will see that in a few instances rebels and disciples came from the same set of parents. No doubt some of my readers are thinking about how very different each of their children are. Some who were compliant growing up walk away from Christ during adulthood and, as I mentioned earlier, some who were defiant embrace the faith wholeheartedly many years later.

Below I've listed several biblical principles that I hope will help keep you focused during these heartbreaking years.

Focus on your job, while totally trusting God to do his.

Don't try to do God's job for him. Don't try to do your children's job for them. Remember: God is totally sovereign (Phil. 1:29). God opens and closes hearts (1 Kings 8:58; Ezek. 36:26; Acts 16:4). He does whatever he pleases (Ps. 135:6; Jer. 10:23). Only the Holy Spirit can give the gift of true faith to your children, whether young or grown-up. How often my husband used to pray, "Lord, forgive me for trying to play the role of the Holy Spirit in my child's heart." Being a good parent doesn't instill true faith in Christ in the hearts of our sons and daughters. Such a simple truth is so difficult to learn. Remember: *God has no grandchildren.*

Our job is to pray hard and trust God for the results. I've found that praying in faith is much harder than running around "doing" for our children. We mothers are especially prone to fixing our children's problems, aren't we? From applying bandages to bloody knees

to making sure they haven't forgotten their schoolwork, we believe that if they're in a crisis, we are required to immediately come to the rescue.

For some of us, our prayer needs to be, "Lord, let me trust you enough to take my hands off, and let him learn to do this without me." We aren't doing our children any favors if we do for them what they can do for themselves. In fact, we're only creating dependency on ourselves. Our job is to point them to Christ, while helping in age-appropriate ways. Just as a plant can be overwatered, so our offspring can be over-mothered.

As a biblical counselor, I have seen many mothers of adult children who seem driven to make sure their dear child is fed, warm, happy, clean, and socially acceptable. They seem to be unable to let go. Their whole identity is wrapped up in their children; they become the mothers' purpose for living. These mothers need to be needed, and sometimes they make an idol of their child's love or success. The world calls this enabling behavior or co-dependency; but I think a better word be co-idolatry. The good news about calling some action sin, when it really is sin, is that it can be repented of and forgiven. Praise God for his boundless grace!

Take personal responsibility.

Don't play the shame game or the blame game. Let me encourage you not to take on more or less responsibility than is biblically required. There is no doubt that we, as parents, are 100 percent responsible for our own thoughts, words, and deeds. But it is also true that our children are 100 percent responsible for their own thoughts, words, and deeds. In light of the truth that many Scriptures admonish parents as well as children, it is clear that parents have a huge influence on their children. At the same time, God does not permit any adult or child to blame their sin on their parents.

One of my most vivid memories of dealing with this concept was when our daughter Arielle was very sick with her brain disorder. She had taken one of her many walks, from which she would return, or be returned by the police, hours or days later. Not having been diagnosed as yet, she knew only that she was feeling very angry and agitated and wanted to get out of the house and away from her parents. On this one occasion, she was about fifteen years old and had been missing all night. Because this had happened several times before, I was able not to be totally frantic. I was familiar with the routine by then. At 6:30 in the morning I responded to a call from the police saying that our daughter had been found. When I arrived at the location several miles from our home, the policeman said she had been discovered sleeping on the doorstep of an insurance agent in a dangerous neighborhood. The owner had called the police. The strain must have been obvious by my facial expression, because the man who owned the business and had called the police came to the door and said to me, "This is not your fault. You are not a bad mother." I knew he had hit a nerve in me, because I could hardly keep myself from breaking out in sobs.

For the longest time I had a running argument with, myself. If God tells us how to raise our children, and they turn out bad, then isn't that my fault? This is what I call the shame game. Later came the blame game. I'd fall into the ditch on the other side of the road by saying, "This is God's fault. If there is a god, he's cruel or weak." I'd go back and forth between beating myself up for not being able to help my miserable and tortured daughter and being angry and frustrated with her uncontrollable behavior. I'd feel sorry for her; then I'd have a big pity party for myself. Doubts and fears overwhelmed me sometimes. Then

God would bring someone into my life just at the right moment to remind me of his promises.

Trust the promises of God. He knows what you need.

Although Romans 8:28 is sometimes overused or misused, it is still one of the most precious promises in all the Word of God, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (NIV). The bottom line that we parents of wandering and rebellious children must hold onto constantly is this promise: God knows what I need to become more like Christ. My heavenly Father designed this wretched trial because he loves me and wants me to trust him more, to comfort others who suffer in the same way, and to obey him more eagerly and quickly. The question that has to be answered at the end of the day is, *Do I really believe that God knows what I need and is doing whatever it takes to get the message across to me?* I take great comfort in the knowledge that God is causing this truth to be real in all of his children's lives.

The famous English author C. S. Lewis has written that God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks to us in our work, but shouts to us in our pain. I've heard much from the Lord as he has instructed me during this painful season in my life.

God will give you the desires of your heart.

Although God has never promised to save each and every one of his children's offspring, he has promised to give you the desires of your heart if you delight yourself in him (Ps. 37:4). Make it your heart's desire that your children know, fear, love, and serve the triune God of the Bible. If that is more important to you than your child's personal appearance, intelligence, career, athletic prowess, acting ability, or emotional happiness, then you can trust that God will give you the desires of your heart.

One more verse that is meaningful to many mothers is Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (NKJV). Certainly this promise has kept many distraught Christian parents from losing hope. But there is also a reverse side of this verse. Jay Adams, biblical language scholar, says that it has been poorly translated. Most versions translate the end of the verse "in the way he should go." Adams says that a better translation is "in his own way." In light of this truth, the verse serves as a warning as well as a comfort. The point Solomon is making is that if parents consistently allow a child to choose his or her own way, that will stay with him or her throughout life. A child who has been reared with permissiveness is likely to struggle with submission to authority. One who has been told that God's way is higher than his or her way will more likely learn compliance. My mother often said, "Let her have her own way, and she'll turn out the wrong way."

Never Give Up

To conclude this chapter, let me remind you: never give up hope. You can have perfect peace in the midst of the storm. Because the Lord Jesus is bearing our burdens, we can rest knowing that his yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matt. 11:29-30). During the dark hours when you're tempted to give up and feel most overwhelmed, turn your eyes and gaze upon your Savior. The one who made Peter walk on water can keep you from sinking too. I know that's true because he has surely done that for me many times.

During the time when you're waiting for God's salvation, keep praying for and reaching out to your lost son or daughter. We keep writing to our son in prison even though he doesn't respond. Even if your son or daughter has been excommunicated, as two of mine have, you can still speak to them or write to them of Christ's free offer of the gospel. Matthew 18:15-17 teaches us to treat those who have been put out of the church as a pagan or an unbeliever. But these dear pagans need to hear the gospel, no matter how many times they have rejected it. God eventually hardens hearts that repeatedly defy him (Josh. 11:20; 2 Thess. 2:10-11), but when that hardening occurs hasn't been revealed to us. It's not our decision; it's God's. Our job is to keep "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15), believing that today might be the day of their salvation.

You can also look for natural opportunities to present the claims of Jesus to specific situations your children are facing, while at the same time refusing to compromise your commitments to the Word of God. When there are visits between you, don't change your behavior to suit them. The message that needs to get across to them is that your relationship with God is far more important than your relationship to any family member. I don't claim to walk this narrow road called grace and truth very well. But I thank God that his grace is greater than all my sin.

We cannot outlove God. If we love these wandering souls as much as we do, how much more does our heavenly Father love them? Infinitely more!

Becoming a woman of wisdom

1. In what ways were you encouraged by Eileen's story?
2. How did her insights challenge you?
3. In what ways, if any, have you been hanging onto your adult children? How much of your value as a mother or a woman is wrapped up in their success or failure?
4. Is your children's spiritual state the most important concern you have, or are you more concerned about their comfort and health? Although their health and comfort are important issues, they are nothing compared with their ultimate destination.
5. Summarize the teaching of this chapter in four or five sentences.