

A Journey in Search of Comfort as a Christian Parent of Unconverted Children

By Howard Eames

There are few events in the Christian life that can be more disturbing and cause more anguish of heart than to see your children become young adults while continuing to evidence a spiritual disposition that seems to betray that these most precious gifts from God remain strangers to His grace. Yes, they may think that they are believers, but there is no love for His Word, no desire to be with His people, and no desire to live for the glory of God. The fixed disposition of a true believer in Jesus Christ simply is not there. And so the search for comfort begins—the journey begins in earnest.

Naturally, all believers are convinced that true comfort comes from God speaking through His Word, and through the perspective and worldview that can be inferred from Scripture. My wife and I have done a great deal of reading! We have three children, ages seventeen, twenty, and twenty-three. Only one of them has become “a joint heir of the grace of life.” The other two remain in the “far country,” although their journey as prodigal sons has not been quite as riotous as the one recorded for us in the Gospels.

Recently my wife, Donna, and I were greatly encouraged by reading Jim Elliff’s *Comfort for Christian Parents of Unconverted Children*, a brief summary of biblical perspective predicated on biblical authority. What follows is my effort to expand what Jim related in ten concise points—the ten points of comfort for Christian parents of unconverted children, if you will. You might think of the commentary and exposition below like decorating a Christmas tree. What Jim wrote is the Christmas tree. The ornaments and decorations we supply come from our own reading, enhanced by our personal experience as parents seeking comfort.

Several years ago, my wife and I sought to provide a venue for parents of teenagers, having become parents of three teens ourselves, and having experienced both the joys and unbelievable difficulties of being parents. Paul David Tripp had adapted his most excellent book, *Age of Opportunity: a Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens*, for a nine-message video series. We have to this date had opportunity to screen this series for church and school parents (we are Christian educators) several times. These sessions never cease to be profitable.

While greatly profitable for others, the level of comfort I would personally receive from going through the videos and reacquainting myself with the written materials seemed to suffer from the law of diminishing returns. The measures I was attempting to implement in my own home were not achieving the results anticipated. Our boys were beginning to respond to our shaping influences in negative ways, and we began to see their hearts drift even farther into the “far country.” Meanwhile, other seriously detrimental influences caught their attention, and we found ourselves in the same place with many others who have taught and shepherded and prayed—parents in pain. May God be pleased to bless Jim Elliff’s *Comfort for Christian Parents* to the hearts of many. And may He also be pleased to somehow add His blessing to our efforts of enhancement and personalizing of his thoughts.

Jim writes:

“All Christian parents wish that God would show us something to do that would secure our child’s salvation, and then ‘we’d do it with all our might’

because we love our child so much. Yet, God has not made salvation the effect of somebody else's faith; our son or daughter must come to Christ on his or her own. John shows us that all Christians are born into God's family, 'not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man (that is, somebody else's will) but of God.'
(John 1:13).

I have often thought about this. I have searched the Scriptures to see if I could find an ironclad promise from the Lord that I could claim. But then I always seem to return to the same conclusion. Even if there were a clear and unmistakable promise given to parents that their children would assuredly be converted if they would consistently do this or do that, and be sure to do it all in a particular fashion with prayers under-girding all of their efforts, I could never take personal comfort in such a promise. My inconsistencies and sinful failures as a parent would cause such a promise to fall to the ground.

Thankfully, the Bible does not reveal a doctrine of works righteousness in our parenting any more than it does concerning the remainder of our Christian walk. God is merciful to the most inconsistent and undeserving parents. He often blesses them in spite of sinful failures and inconsistencies in raising their children. We live in a fallen world where sin has unhinged everything, even our parenting.

Jim continues,

“Although salvation is the work of God and not something that we can do for our child, there is hope. Consider the following [ten points]:

1. A true burden in prayer for your child is a gift from God. A persistent burden may indicate that God intends to give your child eternal life because authentic prayer always begins with God. Though we cannot be absolutely certain that we know all that God is doing, we should be optimistic if the burden continues.”

As parents, we might all do well to consider the prayer lives of those behind-the-scenes parents whose children have become heroes of the faith. Monica prayed for 32 years for Augustine, and then died the year he was converted to Christ. Now that's a burden for prayer.

I have discovered the hard way that learning how to pray rightly for our children is not always easy. I have received great help from two sources:

I agree with John Piper when he says that we need to learn how to pray “in sync” with how God works. The most authoritative prayers are the most Scripturally-oriented prayers. I have prayed about my prayers for my children, and have made sincere efforts to conform to how the Bible teaches me to pray for others.

Here are some suggestions:

The first thing your children need is an inclination to God and His Word. Without that, nothing else of any real value will occur. Where does such an inclination come from? It comes from the Lord. Our children must want to know God. They must want to read His Word and draw near to Him. These desires come from God. He is the great Incliner of hearts (cf. Proverbs 21:1). Therefore, I pray Psalm 119:36 on behalf of my children: “Lord, incline their hearts to Your testimonies and not to (worldly) gain.” The “pride of life” in a culture of affluence is overwhelming. To see a young person committed to Jesus Christ and His Word, and committed to seeking first His Kingdom, is a rarity. I pray that God would do this great work in their hearts.

Furthermore, my children need to have the eyes of their hearts opened so that when God graciously changes their inclinations from loving their own peculiar pig pen to loving His Word and truth, they might see what is really there, and not be deceived by their own secular or worldly presuppositions. And so I pray Psalm 119:18 for my children: “Lord, open their eyes. Open the very eyes of their hearts that they might behold wonderful and truthful things from your most blessed Word. Lord, lead them into truth and out of error. Reveal Your glory to their heart of hearts.”

But even further, my children need for their hearts to be enlightened. They need to be able to see the glory of Biblical truth, not just interesting facts and stories reminiscent of their childhood days in Sunday School. Who is the great Enlightener of the hearts of men? God is! And so I pray with the Apostle Paul from Ephesians 1:18: “Lord, enlighten the very eyes of their hearts that they might behold the blessedness of Your truth, Your perspective, Your worldview, Your most blessed Person. Lord, give them the anointing you promise in John’s first epistle! (see 1 John 2:27, referring to the Holy Spirit).

Of course what we really want for our children from all this engagement with His Word and the work of His Spirit is that their hearts will ultimately be satisfied with God and not with the world. Where does that satisfaction come from? Surely it comes from the great Satisfier of the eternal souls of men, the Lord Jesus. And so I pray Psalm 90:14, “Lord, satisfy my children with Yourself, satisfy them in the morning with Your steadfast love, that they may rejoice and be glad all their days.”

To be sure, prayers like this from the Psalms and portions of the New Testament could be multiplied ad infinitum. But I trust that these few might be suggestive. I have prayed these prayers many times for my own children and have recently been told that one of my sons has begun to read the Bible again (after several years hiatus, and after he had personally told me he wouldn’t read the Bible for ten years for one reason or another).

C. John Miller and his wife Rose Marie were led to pray for their daughter in the “far country” in a unique fashion. I have prayed similar prayers for my own prodigals. The next three paragraphs are a paraphrase of some of Miller’s thoughts in his excellent book, *Come Back Barbara* (see bibliography):

We should pray for the tearing down of all the works of Satan in the lives of our children (especially those we know have come under evil influences), such as false doctrine, unbelief, atheistic teaching and hatred which the enemy may have built up in their thinking. We must pray that their very thoughts will be brought into captivity to Christ.

Further, we should pray for those bonds of sin that hold our children prisoner. We might think of several areas of concern in this regard: deceiving and lying, dishonesty as a way of life, sensualism, excuse making and blame-shifting (parents in pain often find that a significant part of that pain is their child’s chronic blame shifting, blaming the parents for all of their current problems). Of course, this is part and parcel of the fallen human heart. But this sinful excuse making has been dramatically enhanced by a culture cursed with the therapeutic notions of Freud and Jung. We are a culture of victims! Pray for your child given their own peculiar sins and “characteristic flesh.”

Pray that God might be pleased to arouse their consciences so that they might see the specific evils for what they truly are—sin against God (Psalm 51). Pray that they would not only recognize these sins, but learn to hate them and turn to Christ for cleansing from their guilt and power. And pray with Christ’s authority (in His blessed Name) and with great boldness at the throne of grace. You are coming to a Great King—large petitions with you bring!!

Jim continues,

2. The miracle of the new birth is no less possible to God if your child is attentive to Him or running away from Him. Our child is like all other children when it comes to God’s grace. He is dead spiritually whether he is in church or not, whether he listened well to the truths we tried to teach him or did not, whether he has some interest in God now or has none at all. He may be converted in the pig pen or the pew, and we do not know in this case what is preferred by God.

My wife and I have often marveled at how little our boys seemed to have learned from a classical & Christian education. I have personally wondered if either boy ever stayed awake in my Logic class, considering the airy fairy reasoning that I hear coming from their hearts. But again, it is a fallen world. Sin has unhinged everything. Thomas Aquinas was wrong! The mind is fallen and in deep darkness apart from the saving grace of God.

In 1844, Archibald Alexander penned the following “thoughts on religious experience” that have proven true in our experience:

There is no necessity for any other proof of native depravity than the aversion which children early manifest to religious instruction and to spiritual exercises. From this cause it proceeds, that many children who have the opportunity of a good religious education learn scarcely anything of the most important truths of Christianity. If they are compelled to commit the catechism to memory, they are wont to do this without ever thinking of the doctrines contained in the words which they recite; so that, when the attention is at any time awakened to the subject of religion as a personal concern, they feel themselves to be completely ignorant of the system of divine truth taught in the Bible.

So writes Alexander. But then we have witnessed this very fact. At one time or another, I have echoed the words of the apostle to the Galatians, “Who has bewitched you” . . . how soon you have departed from the gospel of grace presented to you in your childhood. Unconverted children are “bad soil.” They have no root in themselves. They are vulnerable to every wind of false doctrine that might come down the pike.

They listened poorly, and all that you have taught them seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. Now their poor listening skills have come home to roost and they have fallen prey to either false teachers within the pale of Christianity (broadly speaking) or something even more perverse. The sense of helplessness can be overwhelming. But then listen again to the wisdom of C. John Miller, a seasoned brother in this regard:

Your child may have presented for years an outward conformity to an orderly Christian family life. But a child can put on all the external forms of Christian life and behave in good order, and yet not be near God at all. This is perpetuated when parents fail to look below the surface and pass lightly over inner motivations. The result is often to let the child put a veneer over life. The inward person is left untouched and when that happens the inward self can easily become hardened and embittered.

As parents, our grief can be intense when God strips away our façade of comfort and self-sufficiency. We had placed great confidence in moral Christian nurture in the home and in private Christian schools. But these means failed us. No one grows into grace through a Christianized environment alone. No one gets to God by moral self-improvement.

Donna and I had placed a great deal of confidence in having provided all of the supposedly required Christian tools for conversion. We had read the right books, taught the right doctrine, provided a Christian education and worldview. We had prayed fervently and frequently and had claimed the promises of God. And we had given our children to the Lord and asked that He work grace in their hearts.

As Thomas Boston so ably wrote in his treatise on the sovereignty of God in the afflictions of men, “where you anticipated your greatest comfort in life, has now become your greatest source of personal grief.”

Satan would insist that the situation is fixed; these children will not change. They are becoming mighty oak trees of unbelief before your very eyes. You are helpless to change them and the direction they are taking. Nothing can be more overwhelming to a parent than these sorts of thoughts. You and I have a fixed negative image of our children; they are seen as unchangeable. This image may be powerfully reinforced by the recollection of the adolescent’s many failings: repeated acts of rebellion, words of rebellion, looks of rebellion and defiance. But allow me to reassert what Jim Elliff has said:

The miracle of the new birth is no less possible to God if our child is attentive to Him or running away from Him . . . he is dead spiritually whether he is in Church or not. God is able! God answers prayers! A true burden in prayer for your child is a gift of God. All true prayer finds its origin in the mind and will of the Lord Jesus Christ. Take heart! Be courageous in your prayers, beloved. There is great hope to be had. Our God is able to answer exceedingly and abundantly beyond all that you could hope for or even conjure up in your thoughts! Think for a moment about the quarry He found you in, and mined you from.

Jim continues,

3. God does hear our prayers. Though God has taught us that He chooses all who are His before the foundation of the world, He has also taught us that we should pray, and not only pray, but expect the answers to our prayers. It is true that God is sovereign and it is just as true that He answers prayer. In fact, He could not answer prayer if He were not in control of all things.

Indeed, the sovereign Lord has woven our prayers for our children into the very fabric of His sovereign decree, and He has declared without equivocation that all events (the sovereignty of God in the seasons of life—Ecclesiastes 3) are most beautiful and appropriate in their time.

God does hear our prayers. We dishonor Him if we are not eagerly looking for the return of prayers. And yes, waiting on the Lord is one of the most difficult disciplines in the Christian life. But then the Psalms seem to teach that the entire Christian walk is one of waiting on the Lord. He works patience, trust, peace, humility, and true dependence into our hearts *through* our waiting.

We are waiting on His converting grace for our children. In God’s providence, we may be parents faced with the bitter experience of a child’s long-term betrayal. But then this very experience affords us an opportunity to learn new and wonderful things about God’s approach to forgiveness. We may need to learn to

forgive a self-righteous, blame-shifting, irresponsible, parent-dishonoring and unthankful child, over and over and over again. But then we are probably learning a Christ-like love that we so desperately need—a love that is able to look through the hard outer shell of our unbelieving child and see the desperately needy person inside! That is a great gift, is it not?

Do we really love our children, or do we simply love our ideal of what we wanted them to become? Anyone involved in Christian counseling for any season of time discovers that family members often don't love each other for who they really are. They love the ideal image they have created of the other person in their mind.

What our children need from parents, even if they are in pain, is the knowledge that they are loved unconditionally. This is the most powerful weapon in the parent's arsenal, and one that God often uses to touch the hardened conscience of a deeply rebellious spirit (i.e. a child that is running from God, playing games with God).

It has been our experience (often learned the hard way) that we have had to learn to stay out of the way of God's working, of God's answering prayer, and to put our lives at His disposal to be used in ways often contrary to our own instincts. We are committed to C. John Miller's proposal:

Jesus Christ will capture our children, He will free them from their own prison in a way that will most likely highlight their unwillingness to submit to Him and our helplessness in changing them. God will not share His glory with another!

This was what I didn't want to hear, but what has become a healing balm to my soul over time. Reproof and correction are like that, are they not?

The Lord is often graciously driving you and me to see our total need for Him! This has been so in my own life as a parent. You've reached your midnight hour and you are beginning to learn how to beg in prayer (see Luke 11: 5-8). But then God does promise to provide the bread of His Spirit, and He promises to supply that abundantly. That bread might consist of a new wisdom, a new ability to forgive your child, a new perspective on who your child truly is, a new ability to communicate with your child as a young adult, compassion, and desperately needed humility. Is this all bad? Let it never be! You may even be (as I have been) forced to approach your unbelieving child as they have grown into adult years as a non-Christian needing Christ's help rather than an offending son or daughter. But what growth in grace there is to be had! This is no small victory for a parent in pain. I can surely attest to that.

God may be weaving a web of love around you and your wayward child as we speak. He is answering your prayers, yet in ways that you may not have chosen. A significant part of that web of love may be your humbling as parents. But then this is most necessary, beloved. Repeatedly I have had to get the stuffing kicked

out of me in my conflict with my sons. I have had to live year after year with the tension of the battle. But then I have concluded (as we stand on the brink of 2005) that much of that tension was only in my mind.

I have been just as much of a wayward father as my sons have been wayward sons. I have failed so many times. I have been so inconsistent. I have majored on the minors and minored on the majors, and my children have all been the sorry recipients of my botched attempts at parenting them in a godly way. But even if you and I have failed, the power of God's grace is so much stronger that neither you nor I ever need to despair.

God may be seeking the rebellious father and mother through the rebellious child. I am not saying that this is your case, but it could be, even as it was and is the case with me (I speak for myself and not for my wife). It has become more than obvious that God has wanted to change me right along with my sons. I needed to be rescued just as much as they have needed His rescuing grace! God has worked at this change by sending me a series of humbling defeats that have lasted these many years (about ten to be precise).

This is meant to encourage you! You may be blind to your failures even as I have been blind to mine. God is being gracious to you. He is committed to your being conformed to His image as expressed in perfected human nature, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jim continues,

4. We may have hope because of God's election of those who will come to Him. Every child is on his way to hell unless God stops him. God's election is our friend. We would have no hope for our child's salvation without it, because no child would turn to Christ if left in the state of depravity (Romans 3: 9-11). But given God's election of people to Himself, we can be encouraged.

Charles Spurgeon was not born with the doctrines of God's sovereignty in grace prepackaged. He writes that he was meditating on his own conversion one day and stopped to consider, "If left to myself, I never would have come to Jesus Christ in saving faith." And so it is with you and me if we are honest before the Lord. God was able to stop my mad dash to destruction, my toboggan slide to eternal retribution, my wild flight from sanity and all that is true and good. Most surely He is able to arrest my son or daughter's equally madcap adventure in vanity and worldly pleasure.

There is no true joy apart from a biblical understanding and embracing of the absolute and exhaustive sovereignty of God. This is the clear message of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Joy comes "at the end of a tether."¹

That tether is the sovereignty of God. When you and I pray for our unbelieving children, let us pray that they would come to the end of their tether. In a state of what Charles Wesley so appropriately called “nature’s night,” they are in prison. It is a self-induced prison. God is in the business of setting prisoners free, is He not? His electing grace is our friend. In this history of redemption, God has worked wide and deep in Christian homes, in Christian families. We pray that God’s eye will diffuse a quickening ray in the prison of our childrens’ unsaved lives. May they awake, rise and follow Him all their days.

Jim Continues:

5. Your child has some clear knowledge of what it means to be a true Christian. The Spirit certainly may bring this to bear at any time if this is His chosen method. Though it is no less a miracle for a knowledgeable child to be converted than a child with little knowledge, God always uses the gospel seed in every conversion.

How often Donna and I have thought about all the “logs” we have laid in the fireplace of our children’s hearts. God is able to set them ablaze. How many children have been raised in godly homes only to settle into a life of either respectable or defiant rebellion for a season of time. And then God, who is rich in mercy, opened their blind eyes, unstopped their deaf ears, and brought them back to the faith of their father and mother, perhaps the faith of many generations of true believers.

The lives of John Newton and Adoniram Judson are very instructive. It can be a healing experience to read of children who have wandered from parental instruction and Christian obedience only to be returned to the flock by a Sovereign God who is committed to “saving His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

Pray that God will set the logs ablaze by His converting grace. Pray regularly, pray fervently, pray believingly. Immerse yourself (as we have) in biblical truth. Shift your mind to the promises of divine grace found in the Scriptures. As a parent, focus your faith by meditating on a passage like Luke 15, in which you see the great images of faith. You discover the Father’s grace in action. Lost things do not remain lost; they are found. The dead come alive! The lost sheep is found by the shepherd, the lost coin by the housewife, and the lost son is welcomed home with almost scandalous warmth by a loving father.

These are images for your faith—images of a Heavenly Father’s heart for lost souls. Pray that God will give you faith to believe, and to help you in your unbelief!

¹ Douglas Wilson introduces this theme in *Joy at the End of the Tether*, a study in the book of Ecclesiastes. Wilson’s point is that joy in an otherwise vain existence

comes at the end of a very strong tether, which is his way of describing the recognition and embracing of God's absolute & exhaustive sovereignty in a world consigned to frustration, inequalities, inequities, inscrutable repetition, the ephemeral nature of things, the brevity of absolutely everything from happiness to life itself, etc., etc.

Jim Continues:

6. Your own disobedience in the past will not ultimately keep your child from becoming a believer. It is pointless to berate yourself for any wrong behavior on your part as if it were the reason your child is without Christ. This does not mean that we as parents should not repent and do better, and even admit wrong to our children. But the reason your child is without Christ is related to his or her own sin. Every parent is sinful and inconsistent. This has never been a barrier to God if He desires to save your child. Illustrations abound of children who come from far less godly families who are nonetheless converted to Christ. In fact, this may have been the case in your own experience.

Well, it was the case in both of our experiences. Donna and I have come from very rebellious backgrounds. Neither of us were raised in a truly Christian home (in fact, I was raised a Mormon and became a proselytizing atheist until converted at age 28). Both of us are trophies of His amazing grace! And it pleased our sovereign Lord to draw us to Himself relatively late in life, and only after a great deal of deception and religious confusion. His electing love and grace shines very brightly in our lives. And now we are both warriors for His truth. That is what often happens to people who have been religiously deceived and then are brought to the truth. They become soldiers, just like "Valiant for the Truth" in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.

We have come to see that our sins and failures and inconsistencies have not been the reason for our children's unbelief. They were conceived in unbelief. They have responded poorly (at times) to our shaping influences, and their heart aversion to God's truth has taken form over many, many years. And now they have fallen into what we would consider Christian heresy (a contemporary form of Socinianism for the curious).

And yes, it is difficult to forgive oneself for failures and sins and inconsistencies and for saying those things to our defiant teens that should have never, never come out of our mouths. And yes, our children can be cruel and amazingly resourceful in their blame-shifting and fault finding. I mean, it is never their fault, is it? Such is the fallen condition of man's heart. Sin has unhinged everything!

But Donna and I had absolutely no logs in the fireplace when God found us and set the fire in our hearts. Your children (and my children) have many, many fine logs on the heart. May God be pleased to light them on fire as we continue to pray. Confess your sins and failures, but remember, please remember, parents:

In the Gospel and for the sake of Jesus Christ, God deals with us as if we had never sinned. Equally glorious is that He deals with us as if we have always done the right thing. This is the meaning of justification, and this is to the praise of the glory of His grace. If you do not believe this, then you need to personally put the “amazing” back into grace for your own life as a parent.

Jim Continues:

7. Some children may need the experience of being away from parental care in order to face up to their own need of Christ. The sense of need for many may be discovered only in the context of difficulties. We should not be surprised if it takes some solo flying before a child learns that he or she really needs another as his or her pilot.

And the word is pilot, not co-pilot! All men apart from grace are independent of God. They are sinful and pridefully autonomous. They hate God and love sin. And they live in the Kingdom of Self. That was my experience prior to conversion, and now I see this same sort of dynamic working its way out in the lives of my boys in their unbelief. It is both heart-rending and pitiful. But then Donna and I have learned to pray much more effectively for our older son now that he is “out there in the world.”

We know what it took for us to be humbled in God’s providence. We pray that our sons come to the same humbling set of providential circumstances so that they might be “taught from above.” God has some of the most interesting ways and means of humbling human pride and revealing to men’s hearts their need for Him.

We will never be truly certain if our children are converted until they leave our Christian homes—until they step away from the protecting and restraining influences of Christian parents who maintain for them a safe Christian environment with all of its attending comfort and security—for the sake of Jesus Christ and the gospel. The all-pervasive method of evangelism is so harmful and treacherous. We have been taught to trust in a decisional mentality with regard to the salvation of our sons and daughters (Have they done the prescribed activity? Have they prayed the “sinner’s prayer,” walked the aisle, raised their hand at the appropriate time following a gospel message, etc?). You and I need to cultivate a dispositional mentality with regard to the conversion of our precious children. If we want to see that which will rightly assure us that they are truly converted to Christ, we should be looking for:

- 1) a fixed disposition of repentance toward God,
- 2) the ongoing and growing exercise of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and

3) a life that reveals a pattern of sanctified living, the “pursuit of holiness without which no man shall see the Lord.”

Jim continues:

8. Remember that there are lots of people who have come to appreciate their history prior to coming to Christ. I’m not saying that these people would not have wanted conversion earlier, but that the pain of their pre-conversion history has left them with compassion, understanding, knowledge, testimony and a burden that they would perhaps not have had any other way. They’ve seen God’s wisdom in the timing of their conversion. This may well be so with your child. Paul said that there was a reason he was chosen to be converted even though he was a murderer, blasphemer and violent aggressor—so that people will see and have hope that God can save anyone.

This follows from “seeing life from the context of difficulties.” Sometimes that context must necessarily be extended. I have met children who are evidently converted, having been raised in a Christian environment from the inception, and they are blasé about the things of God. They often get caught up in the distractions of a culture given over to distraction (“pop culture”). Very often the “pains of pre-conversion” extrude from a life lived in “nature’s night” a true warrior for the faith. I believe this has been so in both my life and the life of my dear wife. Our daughter was converted in her teens, but her bout with diabetes (insulin-dependent) caused her to dig very, very deep into the things of the Lord. Her Bible is highlighted and cross-referenced, and she writes poetry that displays the depth of her spirituality. There are times when I am personally envious of her spirituality. But then that is the sort of life that can be extruded by the Almighty “in the context of life’s difficulties.” And sometimes those difficulties must last several years.

Thomas Goodwin (the English Puritan) wrote an amazing treatise on Romans 6:17 that offers explanation as to why God might allow or even see fit (He is sovereign) to leave his elect so long in their sins before regenerating them. Here is that text from Scripture:

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed.

Goodwin masterfully explores the advantages (ultimately) in one’s being left in sin until they grow to maturity, rather than being saved in early childhood. Goodwin concludes: God aims to confound Satan. Before conversion ‘the devil rules and reigns as fully in one that is elect, as any other man and finds no difference (Eph. 2:2).’ But then God comes to deliver. Now consider what a confusion it must needs be to the devil, that when for ten or twenty years he hath possessed a man in peace . . . (thinking) that he is his own, and that he shall

have him in hell with him, all of a sudden God delivers that man by an act of gracious power.'

Goodwin lists other sound reasons why God chooses to let many of His elect ripen in sin before He delivers them. Were we all converted in our mother's womb these advantages would not occur. God's wisdom is justified of its children.

Regarding true and saving conversion, we must as parents continually remember: God works with power, and can make the unwilling willing; if He undertake the conversion of a soul, it will be converted. All the pious workings of our heart towards God are the fruit and consequence of the powerful working of His grace in us.

Thomas Goodwin

Indeed, this is the story of my own life, as well as the lives of countless others in the history of Christ's amazing mission to "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). My life was much like that of John Newton in that I had become one of Satan's chief under-tempters. I would have pulled many within my circles of influence with me into perdition and eternal destruction, willfully and gleefully. But then God, "who is rich in mercy and grace," made me a trophy of His grace. He showed me the amazing nature of biblical grace, much like the slave trader become shepherd of souls and hymn writer, John Newton – who also came to faith in Christ late in life.

Jim Continues:

9. You cannot save your child no matter how hard you try. You are in a position of trust alone. This is good because it is the only way to please God (Heb. 11:6). Your rest in God, while simultaneously praying to the God who answers prayer, will be an encouragement to others in the same situation. It will also help you to respond to your child more positively, and will make your life far more joyful than your anxiety ever could.

I have tried anxiety. It is a hopeless taskmaster. And yes, resting in the Lord is never, this side of the veil of glory, a consistent experience. God has given Donna and me a modicum of rest and trust. I continually pray that He will help me in my unbelief, which is the source of almost all of my anxiety. If you suffer from my disorder (i.e. you are somewhat of a control-freak), God will need to bring you to another position entirely. He is in control. He is the Lord. Solomon insists that this is the "tether" you and I must find ourselves at the end of. But then there is no other place to find true Christian joy. God is God and we are not! It's really that simple. But then who is God? If He is infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably wise, gracious, merciful, loving, and if His promises are unshakeable, your greatest enemy and mine is our sinful unbelief! May God be pleased to rescue us along with our unbelieving children – Amen?

Jim concludes:

10. Finally, remember that God has a purpose in all He does. We will one day rejoice that God has done a perfect job of ruling His universe. When we acknowledge this and put God even above our children, we will actually demonstrate to our child the way a Christian is to live.

Spurgeon's mother reportedly told him in his unbelief, "My own soul will be a witness against you on that awesome day of the Lord if you don't repent and believe His gospel." She said that in light of many, many, many parental exhortations to close with Jesus Christ in His unspeakable offer of mercy. That is what it is to live like a Christian. I close with the words of her beloved son whose ministry affected so many on two sides of the Atlantic:

The Plan

(Excerpted from C. H. Spurgeon's sermon – "A Feast for Faith" on Isaiah. 28:29)

God does not work without a plan! God has not left the world to chance. There are some men who are always kicking against the doctrine of an eternal purpose, and who grow angry if you assert that God has settled what shall occur.

It is by the consent of all agreed that men are foolish if they work without a plan, and yet they cry out when we insist that God also, in all His working, is fulfilling a well arranged plan.

Depend upon it, however, let men rebel against this truth as they will, that God has determined the end from the beginning. He has left no screw loose in the machine, He has left nothing to chance or accident.

Nothing with God is the subject of an "if" or a "peradventure," but even the agency of man, free as it is, as untouched and undisturbed as if there were no God, even this is guided by His mysterious power, and works out thoroughly His own purpose in every jot and tittle.

God wings the thunderbolt, and shall He not guide the most passionate spirit?
God puts a bit into the mouth of the whirlwind, and shall He not control the most ambitious will?

God takes care that even the sea shall come no farther than He bids it, and shall not the heart of man be equally subject to the Divine purpose?

Yielding to man his free agency, giving to him his responsibility, leaving him as free as if there were no purpose and no decree, yet the eternal Jehovah works out His plans, and achieves His purpose to the praise of His glory.

Everything that has moved or shall move in heaven, and earth, and hell, has been, is, and shall be according to the counsel and foreknowledge of God, fulfilling a holy, just, wise and unalterable purpose!

God is wonderful in His design and excellent in His working. Believer, God overrules all things for your good. The needs-be for all that you have suffered, has been most accurately determined by God.

Your course is all mapped out by your Lord. Nothing will take Him by surprise. There will be no novelties to Him. There will be no occurrences which He did not foresee, and for which, therefore, He has not provided. He has arranged all, and you have but to patiently wait, and you shall sing a song of deliverance.

Your life has been arranged on the best possible principles, so that if you had been gifted with unerring wisdom, you would have arranged a life for yourselves exactly similar to the one through which you have passed.

Let us *trust* God where we cannot *trace* Him.

In the end we shall read the whole of God's purpose as one grand poem, and there will not be one verse in it that has a syllable too much, or a word too little. There will not be one stanza or letter redundant, much less one that is erased. But from beginning to end we shall see the master pen and the master-mind drawing forth the glorious array of majestic thoughts. And with angels, and seraphs, and principalities, and powers – shall burst forth into one mighty song:

“Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! the Lord God Omnipotent reigns!” We shall see how from the first even to the last, the King has been ruling all things according to His own will.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Bibliography and Contact Information

The following are some important sources for your reading and prayer. Our encouragement for parents in pain—those seeking the comfort that comes from the Lord and His Word, and comfort that comes from those who have had similar experiences “in pain” (2 Cor. 1)—would be that you would obtain these works and study them first hand. There is a new work being published in March that we would recommend as well, knowing the co-writers as we do.²

Come Back Barbara, by the late C. John Miller (with copious chapter-concluding notes by Barbara Miller Juliani who did, indeed, “come back” to the faith of her parents after an eight-year fling with the world and sin).

Age of Opportunity: a Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens, by Paul David Tripp

Shepherding a Child's Heart, by Tedd Tripp (for shepherding younger children)

Thoughts on Religious Experience, by Archibald Alexander (very insightful observations from one who was deeply exercised in experiential truths from Scripture)

A Personal Note to Readers: If you found Jim's insights compelling and my expository thoughts helpful, I would love to hear from you and interact over parenting issues. I can be reached at Mr.eames@sbcglobal.net

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Kansas City, Missouri

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² Referring to the upcoming, but as yet unpublished book, *When Good Kids Make Bad Choices: Help And Hope For Hurting Parents*, by Elyse Fitzpatrick, Jim Newheiser, and Laura Hendrickson.