

**HOME TRUTHS: LIFE LESSONS FROM THE 'HOME'
LIFE OF JOSEPH, AND THE PARENTAL CARE OF
PAUL FOR THE THESSALONIANS**

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PART ONE: LESSONS FROM THE 'HOME' LIFE OF JOSEPH

1. PARENTS' HOUSE

THE TEST OF FIDELITY

Early on, the Bible introduces us to someone who would appear to be a most unlikely candidate for success. I'm referring to Joseph, born to the patriarch, Jacob. From his youth, Joseph seems to experience one misadventure after another. But he overcomes, and the great secret of his life is shared repeatedly in the Bible book of Genesis. It's evidently not God's intention that we should miss it. It's the secret of his success, and it's this: that God was with him, in all that he went through. If God is for us, as the Apostle Paul will say later in the Bible, who can be against us?

But let's remind ourselves of some of the details of Joseph's remarkable story, so that we might trace the hand of God over it all – the God who spoke to Joseph as a teenager. Now, that's a remarkable thing. It's worth pausing right there. I don't mean that it's so remarkable that God should speak to a teenager, but what's remarkable is this was the only recorded time in his life when the Bible tells us of God speaking directly to Joseph. And it was dreams that God used to hint at where Joseph's life was headed. There were later times when God helped Joseph have insight into the dreams of other people, but I'm suggesting that

wasn't a message directly to Joseph. By contrast, Abraham and Jacob, and later Moses, knew God speaking to them more frequently and indeed throughout the course of their entire lives.

But with Joseph, it's only recorded happening once, as a teenager, but the remarkable thing was that it set him up for life. It set the course of his entire life. That's one way we see the fidelity of Joseph. He remained true to God's revelation even through dark and challenging times when God's early promises must have seemed to be only a memory that mocked him. It's good when, early in life, we become convinced that God has met with us, and will do what he's promised, and we become motivated to remain faithful to his call. Looking back decades later through the lens of our life's experiences and opportunities, we're then able to confirm the reality of that early encounter with God!

As we say, let's remind ourselves of the details of Joseph's formative years. As we take our Bible reading from Genesis chapter 37, I also want you to register another aspect of Joseph's fidelity: and it's this - how he bore faithful witness to God's revealed truth even when it provoked tensions and jealousies within his family:

“Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan. These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth ... Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. His brothers saw that their father loved him

more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms. Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Please listen to this dream which I have had; for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf."

Then his brothers said to him, "Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, "Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." He related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind" (Genesis 37:1-11).

That was the only time in his life when the Bible records God as having spoken directly to Joseph, in this case using dreams to project a glimpse of where his life was headed. With Joseph, it was just that once, as a teenager, but the remarkable thing was that it set the course of his entire life.

Much later in life, from his comfortable throne in the palace, I wonder, did he think back to those dreams he'd once had as a teenager on the floor of his tent in a faraway land amid all the ridicule of his brothers? With profound gratitude he'd learnt to acknowledge all the way that God had led him. God had in reality been with him – in the pit and in the prison as much as in the palace. Our surroundings and circumstances don't matter as much as knowing that God is with us. When we live conscious of God's presence, as Joseph did, then it's an incentive to keep us faithful to God. Early in the history of Christianity, the Apostles remembered the words of King David in the Old Testament when he said in Psalm 16 that he recognised the Lord 'always before him' – that is, he was conscious of the Lord's presence in his life. David, like Joseph, was tested in having to wait for God's early promised blessings to become a reality – patiently waiting through tough times. God's word of promise tried them, as it does us too, at times.

Psychologists talk about something called 'cognitive dissonance.' They would see it happening when someone's behaviour is no longer consistent with their beliefs. That brings discord or discomfort into their life. We're only comfortable when our beliefs and behaviours are in agreement. As an example, someone may believe in celibacy following a divorce, but if they find themselves with the status of a divorcee, and finding themselves attracted to someone else such that they want to get remarried; they may find a way to modify their previous beliefs so as to accommodate the behaviour they now desire. It's hard to live with tension between our beliefs and behaviours. Of course, if our beliefs are biblical, then it's our behaviours we should be

modifying, so that they conform to our biblical beliefs – but the temptation is to change our beliefs to accommodate our behaviour.

The same type of challenge presents when, as a committed disciple of Jesus Christ, we're careful to follow his commands. But if it should be that we experience what appears to be a lack of blessing on our spiritual experience, then we may be tempted to give up on any further attempt at exact obedience – settling instead for what seems to work elsewhere as we look around us at the experience of others. It takes fidelity to continue steadfastly in our biblical beliefs when we don't see the reasonable results we might expect. Joseph models that kind of fidelity – that type of faithfulness, and he gives us a good example to learn from.

But there's another aspect to his fidelity. Let's go back with him to that early time when he first had those dreams. The thirty-seventh chapter of Genesis tells us: "Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father" (Genesis 37:2).

Of course, this may well indicate a measure of naivety or precociousness. Did he really think this information would endear him to his older brothers? On the other hand, he did bear faithful witness to God's revealed truth, undaunted by the fact that it contributed to pre-existing family tensions.

I salute a teenager I know like that in the Philippines. He's been through the same kind of experience. His family worship ancestral spirits, but he's experienced God speaking to him through the Bible. He's shared the Good News of Christianity from the Bible faithfully with his father, and he's been rejected for it, and thrown out onto the streets. I pray that, like Joseph, the truth God's revealed to him early in life will set the direction of his whole life until Jesus comes. And I've never forgotten a young believer I met years ago in India. He came from a Hindu family before finding forgiveness for all his sins through the cross of Christ. When his father died, he was asked to carry a blazing torch to ignite his father's funeral pyre. He respectfully begged to be excused, saying he was already carrying a cross for Jesus. What these two young disciples have in common is their fidelity in witnessing to God's revealed truth in the Bible, and to following the Lord Jesus Christ.

What about us? Are we prepared to stand up to witness for a particular truth of God's Word which we know will be unpopular in a given setting or with a specific group of people? It's tempting to water it down or speak it softly or talk about a different topic whenever we suspect there will be no favourable response. We're stewards of God's Word, and it's required in stewards that they're found to be faithful.

We've been thinking of Joseph in his parental home, growing up as a youth. This study has drawn attention to his fidelity. He kept faith with the content of the dreams he received, and so with the word of God to him. What's more he was a faithful witness to the content of that revelation from God. This is the first of five homes or houses with which Joseph, in his life, was

associated. From each, we hope to learn one vital home truth. In this instance – in his parents, house – Joseph models fidelity. Let's learn with him this vital home truth for followers of Christ.

2. POTIPHAR'S HOUSE

THE TEST OF PURITY

A Swiss lady once advertised for a chauffeur and received three applicants for the job. She interviewed them individually, each time asking the same question: "How close to a precipice could you drive and still be safe?" The first assured her that he could come within 15 centimeters in complete safety. The second applicant boasted that he could let his outer wheel run on the edge and she'd still have nothing to worry about. The third and last candidate admitted that he didn't know, but that he'd simply prefer to keep as far away as possible. Needless to say, he got the job!

Back again with Joseph – we said he was an unlikely candidate for success – were it not for the fact that the great secret of his life was: *the Lord was with him*. Sensing God with him, gave Joseph the motivation to stay pure – and that's what this study will major on. We've already remembered Joseph in his parental home, growing up as a youth. It was a study that drew our attention to his fidelity. He kept faith with the content of the dreams he received, and so with the word of God to him. What's more he was a faithful witness to the content of that revelation from God. In this second study, we come to the second of the five homes or houses with which Joseph, in his life, was associated. From each, our aim is to learn one vital 'home' truth.

Let's recap where we're up to in the Joseph story. Fake news is a big concern that trends today. But it's not new. Joseph's father had been on the receiving end of the fake news that his favourite son, Joseph, was dead, killed by some wild animal. The reality was that Joseph, after he'd been betrayed by his jealous older brothers who'd faked his death and sold him into a life of slavery in Egypt – Joseph found himself the unwilling object of the sexual advances of his boss's wife. In that situation, Joseph models for us how - in the case of temptation – like an infection - prevention or avoidance is the best strategy. We read:

“Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there. The LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. Now his master saw that the LORD was with him and how the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand” (Genesis 39:1-3).

It would appear that Joseph was conscious of God's presence, as with king David who wrote in his (16th) Psalm, “I saw the Lord always in my presence.” What difference would it make to our television viewing and internet browsing if we were acutely aware of the Lord being there with us, and exposed to all that we were viewing? That's the first point we pick up from Joseph's defence against temptation – the need to be alive to the presence of the Lord always in our lives. Let's continue:

“So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge. It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; thus the LORD's blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field. So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. It came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. "There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?" As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her” (Genesis 39:4-10).

This is where we interrupt again to make sure we pick up the second point. The woman persisted in her advances and sexual harassment. Think of how Joseph is away from home and parental influence. Misfortune has befallen him, and he could think he'd nothing to lose, nor to live for anyway. But Joseph had

made the principles of his previous home-life his very own. He chose to continue to live by them. We were saying how his boss's wife persisted in her advances and sexual harassment. The media these days regularly reports on businesses and even industries where individuals face regular sexual harassment. Joseph had his strategy worked out long ago. He didn't allow himself to be with her. He did his level best to avoid compromising situations. Today, anyone operating in a position of trust, such as a teacher or youth club leader, must adopt so-called safeguarding standards. These would include sensible working practices, for example not being alone in a room (without windows) with a student, and not offering private transport. Let's take the next section:

“Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside. She caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside” (Genesis 39:11-12).

Joseph's final strategy was: if all else fails, run! This agrees with the advice which Paul, much later, would give to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:11). When dealing with temptation and harmful desires, Paul says 'flee from these things.' In other words, put as much distance as you can between yourself and them. This takes us back to our opening illustration of the Swiss lady looking for a new chauffeur. In answer to her test question of how near the cliff edge he could drive and still be safe, the successful candidate had said: 'I wouldn't go anywhere near it! Correct answer! Also

for any temptation. Joseph, then, has done everything right. He succeeds in avoiding temptation, but soon discovers there's a price to pay:

"When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed. "When he heard that I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled and went outside." So she left his garment beside her until his master came home. Then she spoke to him with these words, "The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me; and as I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside."

Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your slave did to me," his anger burned. So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail" (Genesis 39:13-20).

Well, we'll leave to our next study to discover how Joseph gets on in the prison house. But what has he taught us about purity? First, try to be conscious of the Lord with us all the time, and the need to act in a way that's consistent with our Christian identity, remembering the perfect example of our Lord's holy life. The good preferences of our parent's home should become

the convictions of our own independent living. Second, Joseph did his best to avoid this woman, trying to make sure he was never left alone with her. But she was determined and powerful, and it was only a matter of time before she would corner him. Third, Joseph demonstrates how we need to run when it's necessary to do so. He sacrificed his dignity to maintain his purity.

I believe these lessons are vital, and here's why. Surveys and research studies, primarily by the Barna Group and Covenant Eyes, reveal that pornography has invaded Christianity:

- Over 40 million Americans are regular visitors to porn sites.
- There are around 42 million porn websites, which totals around 370 million pages of porn.
- 47% of families in the United States reported that pornography is a problem in their home.
- Age eleven is the average age that a child is first exposed to porn, and 94% of children will see porn by the age of 14.
- 70% of Christian youth pastors report that they have had at least one teen come to them for help in dealing with pornography in the past 12 months.
- 68% of church-going men and over 50% of pastors view porn on a regular basis. Of young Christian adults 18-24 years old, 76% actively search for porn.

- 59% of pastors said that married men seek their help for porn use.
- 33% of women aged 25-and-under search for porn at least once per month.
- Only 13% of self-identified Christian women say they never watch porn.
- 57% of pastors say porn addiction is the most damaging issue in their congregation.

Those are devastating statistics and this is why the value of purity is such a vital home truth. Remember Joseph. God has left us his excellent example in the Bible for such a time as this.

3. PRISON HOUSE

THE TEST OF HUMILITY

It's worth reminding ourselves where we've got to with the story of Joseph. We recall he's the Bible teenager who was betrayed by his siblings. Sold into slavery, he next ended up as the victim of sexual harassment and false allegation in a foreign land. In Egypt, where he was traded into slavery, he seemed at first to have landed on his feet with a reasonable master. He was even given responsibility, quite extensive, in fact. All seemed to be going as well as, if not better than, might be expected. That was until his boss's wife started showing inappropriate interest in him.

Joseph had been raised to know the difference between right and wrong. After her advances were spurned, the boss's wife became furious and, turning the accusation against a defenceless slave, had Joseph flung in prison where I'm sure he experienced many dark days of doubting the goodness of God – the God who had seemingly tantalised him as a teenager with the prospect of greatness.

But God shares – with us at least - the purpose behind his testing of Joseph. He shares this in Psalm 105 which informs us that the Word of God tested Joseph. The years of waiting were a test. I doubt if God ever uses anyone in a mighty way, without having first tested him or her.

I heard a poem quoted once. I think it could be an abridgement of something not necessarily of Christian origin, but altered to serve a Christian purpose. It runs like this:

When God wants to drill a man,
And thrill a man,
And skill a man
When God wants to mold a man
To play the noblest part;
When He yearns with all His heart
To create so great and bold a man
That all the world shall be amazed,
Watch His methods, watch His ways!
How He ruthlessly perfects
Whom He royally elects!
How He hammers him and hurts him,
And with mighty blows converts him
Into trial shapes of clay which
Only God understands;
While his tortured heart is crying

And he lifts beseeching hands!
How He bends but never breaks
When his good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses,
And which every purpose fuses him;
By every act induces him
To try His splendor out -
God knows what He's about.

God had a part for Joseph to play, and it would be more amazing than the description lyricists have given to his so-called 'technicolour dreamcoat'. And Joseph was no exception to the rule that to be used he would first be tested. God ruthlessly perfected him with the hammer blows of sibling betrayal, then his being traded into slavery, where he was sexually harassed and falsely accused, and now we find him flung in prison and left there: "Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail" (Genesis 39:20).

The nation of Israel, with its twelve tribes, would sometime later be tested by the hardships of their desert journey. It didn't turn out too well for them, you may recall. Moses told them:

"You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 8:3).

David, Israel's most famous king in history, was also someone humbled through severe trials. He was exposed for years to his predecessor's insane jealousy. The Apostle Paul endured many forms of persecution and hardships – until he learned to be content in any circumstances and knew how to get along with humble means (Philippians 4:11,12). And there we see God's goal: the goal of humility. God alone was to be the hero of their stories.

As Joseph's soul went into the iron shackles of the prison; it was as if the strength of the iron went into his own soul (Psalm 105:16-24). Strength of character was built up all the while his patience was being proved through waiting for God's unlikely promise to materialize. But the LORD was with him, in the prison as well as everywhere else.

"Then it came about after these things, the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt offended their lord, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was furious with his

two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. So he put them in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, in the jail, the same place where Joseph was imprisoned. The captain of the bodyguard put Joseph in charge of them, and he took care of them; and they were in confinement for some time. Then the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt, who were confined in jail, both had a dream the same night, each man with his own dream and each dream with its own interpretation.

When Joseph came to them in the morning and observed them, behold, they were dejected. He asked Pharaoh's officials who were with him in confinement in his master's house, "Why are your faces so sad today?" Then they said to him, "We have had a dream and there is no one to interpret it." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please." So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, "In my dream, behold, there was a vine in front of me; and on the vine were three branches. And as it was budding, its blossoms came out, and its clusters produced ripe grapes. Now Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; so I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I put the cup into Pharaoh's hand."

Then Joseph said to him, "This is the interpretation of it: the three branches are three days; within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore

you to your office; and you will put Pharaoh's cup into his hand according to your former custom when you were his cupbearer. Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and please do me a kindness by mentioning me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house. For I was in fact kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon."

Thus it came about on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants; and he lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer ... among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh's hand; ... Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him" (Genesis 40:1-23).

We might think, 'how is it possible he could fail to remember the one man who was instrumental in his own release?' But the word isn't used that way here or in other places in the Bible, such as when we read that God remembered Noah. You don't think God could ever have forgotten Noah, do you? No, used like this, the word 'remember' means to think on a person with particular favour, and do them good. In other words, 'forgot' here meant 'not to intervene on behalf of.' Somehow, the cupbearer to the king got so distractedly busy he didn't stop to figure out how he could actually repay Joseph. In our next study, we'll see how Joseph's God-given ability to interpret dreams is itself the stimulus for prodding the cupbearer into action two years further on.

Well, in conclusion, you remember how we said that Paul learned contentment in the circumstances of trial, discovering how to get along with humble means (Philippians 4:11,12). This may be God's goal for you right now: are you being tested so as to learn greater humility? God wants to be the hero of your story too.

4. PHARAOH'S HOUSE

THE TEST OF INTEGRITY IN PROSPERITY

Well, the prison might have been a tough test of Joseph's character, but a tougher test was still to come in the palace. If that seems hard to understand, think about this. Our faith is tested more in good times than in bad, for when life is easy, and power is at our disposal, it's so easy to forget God and abuse any authority we may have. According to former United States President, Abraham Lincoln, 'nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.' We're going to see Joseph tested in that way ...

It was in the palace that Joseph was called upon to display the maturity that he'd gained in prison. However, before we get to that part, we first have to get Joseph out of prison! That didn't turn out to be as easy as Joseph perhaps first thought because "the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him" (Genesis 40:23).

"Now it happened at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream, and behold, he was standing by the Nile. And lo, from the Nile there came up seven cows, sleek and fat; and they grazed in the marsh grass. Then behold, seven other cows came up after them from the Nile, ugly and gaunt, and they stood by

the other cows on the bank of the Nile. The ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. Then Pharaoh awoke” (Genesis 41:1-4).

The king of Egypt was puzzled about the meaning of this dream. Perhaps it was only now when the cupbearer saw a chance to do himself a good turn, he finally got around to doing one for Joseph. We make that suggestion because there’s more to the word ‘remember’ than first meets the eye. It conveys the notion of looking upon with favour. There was now opportunity for the cupbearer to offer advice after the king of Egypt had been troubled by this dream.

The cupbearer was able to recommend to Pharaoh someone who he knew only too well had a proven track record in interpreting dreams – Joseph, of course. Since God was with Joseph, he was indeed able to assist the king, just as he had the cupbearer. Joseph explained the seven fat cows represented 7 years of bumper crops; but the seven lean or thin cows represented the fact that the years of plenty would be followed by years of famine. Obviously, this episode brought Joseph and his God-given abilities to the attention of the king, as by it he warned Pharaoh that a famine was coming. Who better for Pharaoh to put in charge of managing it than the young man who now stood before him?

“Now let Pharaoh look for a man discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh take action to appoint overseers in charge of the land, and let him exact a fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven years of abundance. Then let them

gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and store up the grain for food in the cities under Pharaoh's authority, and let them guard it. Let the food become as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land will not perish during the famine."

Now the proposal seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his servants. Then Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?" So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. "You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you." Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt" (Genesis 41:33-41).

This same wisdom with which he'd been endowed, extended to a plan to manage the future famine that God had indicated was coming. Soon Joseph was installed as pharaoh's deputy, the second in command of all Egypt.

"When the seven years of plenty which had been in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said, then there was famine in all the lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, you shall do." When

the famine was spread over all the face of the earth, then Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians; and the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. The people of all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the earth” (Genesis 41:53-57).

We now begin to see how God was weaving the strands together. Because who should come down to Egypt to beg for bread, but his treacherous older brothers! Without even being aware of it, they bowed down before this impressive ruler dressed in all his Egyptian finery – and so fulfilled God’s early revelation to Joseph – all without realizing it, of course, for how were they to know the splendid figure before them was their kid brother? But he knew them, that’s for sure. Time to get even? That’s how many might have thought.

And that’s the test Joseph faced in the time of his prosperity. How many in history have used their arrival in a position of power as an opportunity to settle personal scores? But not Joseph – instead he hatched an impromptu plan to check if his brothers had learned from their earlier mistake of mistreating him. By engineering circumstances which offered the older brothers the chance to free themselves if they now abandoned Joseph’s younger brother, Benjamin, he effectively made his brothers revisit the scene of their previous crime against him. This time, they chose not to abandon Benjamin. That’s when Joseph discovers that they, too, are changed men. It was made obvious when they begin to reveal guilt and remorse for what they’d done to Joseph, and refuse to repeat the mistake with Benjamin.

This was a very mature thing for Joseph to do. Integrity is the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles, or moral uprightness. Joseph did the right thing in reacting in this way to the opportunity which presented itself - even though he'd been greatly wronged by his brothers. Insight might bring you power, but it's character that brings you respect. And we respect Joseph for the character he showed in a tough test. As has been famously said, 'power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely' (John Dalberg-Acton). As second only to the king of Egypt, Joseph had virtually absolute power in that land, but he demonstrates that the principles learned in his youth hadn't been corrupted. This is a man who's conscious that God is with him, and has been with him all the way until this point. The God whose presence had restrained him from immorality; had strengthened him in the prison; now held him back from lusting after revenge. He's going to say it explicitly later, but we can already discern it - that Joseph senses the hand of God upon his life, and so there's a godly integrity about his actions in Pharaoh's house.

We ask ourselves how would we have done? Our circumstances may be much less extreme, but is there someone who has wounded us deeply? How have we handled it? Can you, like Joseph, trust God's sovereign hand in the midst of it? Is there someone you need to forgive?

5. PERSONAL HOUSE

THE TEST OF OUR IDENTITY

We left Joseph forming an impromptu plan to check if his brothers had learned from their earlier mistake of mistreating him. He had pretended not to know who they were when they arrived in Egypt looking to buy bread. Joseph now accuses them of being spies, which, of course, they vigorously deny. By this time Joseph has interrogated them concerning their family details, and by this means has assured himself his father is still alive, and all is well with his younger brother, Benjamin. Joseph maintains his act, and says he'll believe they're not spies if they fetch their younger brother with them next time. Meanwhile he'll keep one of them in custody in Egypt. He's able to hear them discussing this situation among themselves. He hears them say it's God's way of paying them back for their wrong treatment of Joseph. Anyway, they return to their father - and Joseph's father - and in time they need more grain and are faced with returning to Egypt.

“So it came about when they had finished eating the grain which they had brought from Egypt, that their father said to them, “Go back, buy us a little food.” Judah spoke to him, however, saying, “The man solemnly warned us, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.’” ... Judah said to his father Israel, “Send the lad with me and we will arise and go,

that we may live and not die, we as well as you and our little ones. "I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame before you forever... [Jacob reluctantly says] "Take your brother also, and arise, return to the man ..." (Genesis 43:2-3, 8-9).

Joseph is delighted to see them come back, and very especially to set eyes on his younger brother, Benjamin.

"When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to his house steward, "Bring the men into the house, and slay an animal and make ready; for the men are to dine with me at noon." So the man did as Joseph said, and brought the men to Joseph's house ... As he lifted his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, he said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me?" And he said, "May God be gracious to you, my son."

Joseph hurried out for he was deeply stirred over his brother, and he sought a place to weep; and he entered his chamber and wept there. Then he washed his face and came out; and he controlled himself and said, "Serve the meal." ... Now they were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth, and the men looked at one another in astonishment. He took portions to them from his own table, but Benjamin's portion was

five times as much as any of theirs. So they feasted and drank freely with him” (Genesis 43:16-17, 29-31,33-34).

Now comes Joseph’s master-stroke. By engineering circumstances which offered the older brothers the chance to free themselves if they now abandoned Joseph’s younger brother, Benjamin, he effectively makes his brothers revisit the scene of their previous crime against him. This time, they choose not to abandon Benjamin. Here’s how he did it:

“Then he commanded his house steward, saying, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his sack. Put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, and his money for the grain." And he did as Joseph had told him. As soon as it was light, the men were sent away, they with their donkeys. They had just gone out of the city, and were not far off, when Joseph said to his house steward, "Up, follow the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid evil for good?'" (Genesis 44:1-4).

This all happens, and the men are brought back before Joseph to stand accused of theft.

“When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there, and they fell to the ground before him. Joseph said to them, "What is this deed that you have done? ... Judah said, "What can we say

to my lord? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; behold, we are my lord's slaves, both we and the one in whose possession the cup has been found." But he said, "Far be it from me to do this. The man in whose possession the cup has been found, he shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father."

Then Judah approached him, and said, "Oh my lord, may your servant please speak a word in my lord's ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are equal to Pharaoh ... your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then let me bear the blame before my father forever. Now, therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers'" (Genesis 44:14-18, 32-33).

That's when Joseph discovers that they, too, are changed men. It began to be obvious when he'd overheard them talk of their guilt and remorse for what they'd done to him, and was now complete when they refused to repeat the mistake with Benjamin. Joseph has engineered circumstances which offer the older brothers the chance to free themselves if they now abandon his younger brother, Benjamin. In a real sense, he's made them revisit the scene of their previous crime against him. Only, this time, they choose not to abandon Benjamin.

“Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting ... "Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (Genesis 45:3-6,8).

When Joseph discloses his identity to his brothers it's after he's found it in his heart to forgive them. Then, and only then, Joseph discloses his identity to them – and forgives them freely. With mature insight into the ways of God – the product of those prison years when God's Word tested him – he's able to assure them that God was behind, and over, everything that'd happened in order to work out his much bigger plans. In the New Testament, we're told to:

“... put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him - a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all. So, as those who

have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you” (Colossians 3:10-13).

The Apostle Paul has earlier said: “Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God ... For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:1,3). Those verses talk about each true Christian’s identity. We’re spiritually united with Christ in his death and resurrection. We’re called upon here to live out this new identity. Notice that immediately after our identity is disclosed here, we’re called upon to be as forgiving with each other as Christ has been with us. May Joseph’s life story help us learn the same lesson.

PART TWO: FAMILY MATTERS - LESSONS FROM PAUL'S PARENTAL CARE FOR THE THESSALONIANS

1. THE TRAINING GROUND

Having been involved recently in the establishing of a new church on foreign soil, I've been reading again Paul's letters to young or newly planted churches with heightened interest. In 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul writes to the Thessalonian church reminding them of how, shortly after the church had been set up, he'd been torn away from them by hostile circumstances. Leaving them at that time had been the last thing he wanted to do, and he wrote to tell them of the great suspense he'd undergone wondering how they were faring in his absence. When he could bear it no longer, it was then, he explained, that he'd sent Timothy to them to encourage them.

Paul's great fear was that for some reason they might not be continuing in the Christian pathway. Now that Timothy had returned, bringing with him a favourable report of their progress, Paul was overjoyed. The relief in his letter to them can almost be felt. Listen to it in chapter 3, verse 8 as he says: "For now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord". He was so grateful, wasn't he? And he goes on to reveal that day and night

he'd been praying for them and, in fact, at that very moment of writing he burst into prayer for them asking God that their love, which was already a reality, might keep on growing.

But what really struck me in thinking over Paul's love for his spiritual children - that's those who formed this infant church in Thessalonica - what really came home to me, was this pastoral love the apostle was expressing was really parental love. Think of the way he'd really missed them; his unbearable suspense of not knowing about their welfare; the relief of receiving reassuring news at last; and his constant prayerfulness for them - these all bear the marks of a devoted parent's love and care for his or her children. A true parent just wants to be there for their family; has a real protective care for them; is overjoyed to see evidence of progress and development; and is committed to lifelong prayer for them.

I'd like this to be the background and our framework for our short treatment of family matters. It's true beyond a shadow of a doubt that our family life matters very much to God. He is the God from whom every family in heaven and earth is named - that's how the same apostle addressed God in prayer in Ephesians 3 and 15: bowing his knees, he said, to the God from whom every family is named. It's a tremendous example especially as we come to God in our family prayers, isn't it? What a perspective and comfort to be assured that our prayer burdens for family members originate with the one who instituted the family unit at the time of creation and cares about each and every example of it.

The pastoral care of the apostle was itself a reflection of the love of God for his people. Through Isaiah in the Old Testament God says in chapter 1 verse 2 (NKJV): “I have nourished and brought up children” - he was referring then to his ancient people: the Israelites. “I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me”. If you've known difficulties in the domestic sphere; if you've been deeply frustrated by the response of children, then in taking it to the Lord in prayer you can be sure that he fully understands how it feels!

It would be natural enough to suppose on the surface of it that this topic has no relevance for say a single person, but that's really not the case at all. Psalm 68:5,6 tells us that God, who is the Father of the fatherless, “sets the solitary in families”. It's God's desire that we come to know him and in doing so cultivate relationships with other believers on the Lord Jesus. We value the counsel of older, more mature disciples - and on the other side of the equation we can nurture spiritually younger believers. Very soon an 'adopted family' materializes, especially if the Lord uses us to help bring others to the Saviour. Paul spoke of Timothy and others in Corinth as being his 'spiritual children' because he had been instrumental in their coming to faith. Since we intend using Paul's care for the Thessalonian church as an example, in a real sense this is the most direct application of the family lessons we'll be drawing with God's help.

But, you say, what about people who, sadly, haven't had very happy family experiences themselves? In fact, it's said that Martin Luther struggled to rejoice in the thought of God as his father because of his own family background. And I know of other people who've only responded with some measure of

warmth to the idea of God as a father after much intensive counselling. One thing we need to try to appreciate is that our idea of God shouldn't be conditioned by our own imperfect experiences or relationships. It's really meant to be the other way around. That is, our appreciation of God as a father ought to be reflected in our own parenting.

Bearing in mind the idea of modelling our paternal and parental skills on God and his dealings with us as they're revealed to us in the Bible, let's pick up the first point from Paul's letter to the Thessalonian church. It's found in chapter 2, verses 7 and 8: "We proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children" (NASB). The word 'nurse' here comes from an idea meaning to nourish, to rear up, to train up children. Notice again how the pastoral application is drawn from family life, here a mother's nurturing and training of her children. Perhaps this is something that's not as valued as it once was in our society. Not that we wish in any way to speak against mothers who, because of pressure of circumstances have to entrust part of the training and rearing of their children to others, possibly professionals. Whether it's full-time, or whether it has to be part-time, the reality is that child-rearing is a career in itself.

Proverbs 22:6 is a great verse in the Bible on the training of children within a family. It says: "Train up a child in the way he should go" or "Train up a child according to his way". The second translation (found in the margin of the NASB) acknowledges that each child is different. That's something that really came home to me after the birth of our second child. Even from a few months, Anna bore the stamp of her own personality - quite

different from Michael her older brother in her sleep patterns, eating habits, and in the way she reacted to people. In training our children, it's important to be sensitive to their different, God-given characteristics. When it says 'train a child according to his way' the word 'way' literally means something trodden. Elsewhere in the Bible it crops up in different connections as in the effect of someone treading on a bow in order to bend it to shape. That's quite enlightening as we link it back to our child-rearing verse: it relates to how each child's personality is shaped differently. We wouldn't necessarily expect to bring up all our children in exactly the same way: for example, some may respond better to encouragements than warnings or vice versa.

The second point on the training of children that flows directly from an understanding of the same Bible verse in Proverbs 22:6 has to do with the fact that the word 'train' – as in train up a child - comes from a word referring to the roof of the mouth, and was seemingly used to describe the action of a midwife dipping her fingers into the juice of crushed dates and then massaging a child's gums and palate. The tangy taste stimulated the child to suck. We can at least borrow that plausible and colourful background as illustrating that the parents - not exclusively the mother by any means - in training their children, must strive to cultivate a thirst in their child for wholesome things. Think of the words of Philippians 4:8: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things."

If we as parents don't demonstrate such superb family values – but, say, watch any old trash on the television - then it's not very likely our children will acquire a taste for those praiseworthy things of Philippians 4. Above all, parents are to seek to stimulate a real thirst for God and his truth. Many Christian parents have their own stories of their very young children sitting with their little kiddies' Bible - like the eight-year old found sitting in the living room reading her little devotional. “What are you doing?” she was asked by someone. 'I'm pretending to be Mummy,' came the reply.

Mothers, especially, have a tremendous responsibility and privilege in moulding the generation to come, particularly at an early stage when the clay, so to speak, is still wet and impressionable. What's the saying? Isn't it “Give me a child till he's 2 and I'll show you the man'? That could be a very loose paraphrase of our Bible text from Proverbs! There was a former President of the United States who allegedly passed folks in the street without so much as a second glance, but on encountering a child, he would stop and doff his hat, because, he explained, who knows what that child will become. It's an awesome thought, isn't it? Parents, mothers, you are raising tomorrow's leaders. What an impact on history unassuming mothers like Susanna Wesley have had! Who would dare say theirs was a wasted life?

While we're thinking of young family members being impressionable, it's worth noting that in the Bible's inspired advice to parents in Deuteronomy 6 verse 7 it stresses the need for parents 'impressing' or 'teaching diligently' God's commands to their children. Literally, it might have been translated 'you shall intensely sharpen your children' which serves to show that

the type of teaching God has in mind is active, not passive. Certainly, the transfer of truth from one generation to the next is not automatic, but requires time and effort. Time and effort that has to be supplied by parents.

2. A LOVING ATMOSPHERE

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, in the second chapter of the letter, he describes his pastoral care for the church at Thessalonica in terms of the love and care of parents for their families. We can learn from that analogy. Since Paul's behaviour towards the Church at Thessalonica is held up as a good example - and since he compares it to the actions of parents - we can take from it the broad outline of God's will for our family lives.

Well, Paul, you may remember, began by saying in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, that he'd been gentle among them just like a nursing mother who cherishes her children. The main thought in cherishing is to warm - that's warming in the sense of meaning 'to brood or to foster.' This thought of warmth links on with the next point where it says (in v.8) that Paul was affectionately desirous of the Thessalonians. The warmth that characterized his pastoral care for these Christian converts is described in terms of parental love.

Back in the Old Testament when God gave guidance to parents in Deuteronomy chapter 6, he prefaced his remarks by saying: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your might." What does this say to us? Isn't it this: that in family life the paramount thing is love for God? It's God's will that the lives of parents be permeated with love for him. And love for God will overflow into love for others, too. We see and hear of the abuse of children within their own families

and the cruel, bitter lives of youngsters in drug-ridden homes. The atmosphere in a Christian home, however, should be loving - demonstrating the type of tender affection for each other that Paul had for the Thessalonians.

It recalls for me the touching tenderness of God's language towards Israel, called Ephraim in Hosea 11:3, God says: "I ... taught Ephraim to walk, I took them in My arms ... I led them with cords." Any parent can relate to God's description here of gently and tenderly assisting a toddler to take those first faltering steps. With real affection and satisfaction and pleasure the parent says, "Well done!" That love has to be preserved lifelong through prayer. Sometimes it'll require to be tough love when correction needs to be applied, for read on in Hosea to find out how God's love isn't an indulgent, sentimental thing. Far from it! Hebrews 12:6 confirms that "whom the LORD loves He disciplines." The important thing for us to imitate is that even his disciplines are full of love.

To summarize, what we're saying is God's love must be uppermost in family life, and we're saying that on the authority of Deuteronomy chapter 6. We need to put first what God puts first. If God doesn't have the first place in our lives, then our children will be quick to spot the hypocrisy when we attempt to teach them spiritual values. We need to pass down to our children a healthy reverence for God as well as an attentive ear to obey his voice.

When we keep the first and greatest command of loving God, we'll find that leads us to the second command about loving others. And who more natural to be the recipients of that love

than those of our own families? On the subject of God's love in the home, I wonder if you've come across what's been called a mother's paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13? It's due to Dianne Lorang and goes like this:

'If I talk to my children about what is right and what is wrong, but have not love, I am like a ringing doorbell or pots banging in the kitchen. And though I know what stages they will go through, and understand their growing pains, and can answer all their questions about life, and believe myself to be a devoted mother, but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give up the fulfilment of a career to make my children's lives better, and stay up all night sewing costumes or baking cookies on short notice, but grumble about lack of sleep, I have not love and accomplish nothing.

A loving mother is patient with her children's immaturity and kind even when they are not; a loving mother is not jealous of their youth nor does she hold it over their heads whenever she has sacrificed for them.

A loving mother does not push her children into doing things her way. She is not irritable, when the chicken pox has kept her confined with three whining children for two weeks, and does not resent the child who brought the affliction home in the first place.

A loving mother is not relieved when her disagreeable child finally disobeys her directly and she can punish him, but rather rejoices with him when he is being more cooperative.

A loving mother bears much of the responsibility for her children; she believes in them; she hopes in each one's individual ability to stand out as a light in a dark world; she endures every backache and heartache to accomplish that.

A loving mother never really dies. As for home-baked bread, it will be consumed and forgotten; as for spotless floors, they will soon gather dust and heel marks. And as for children, well right now new toys, friends, and food are all-important to them. But when they grow up it will have been how their mother loved them that will determine how they love others. In that way she will live on.

So care, training, and a loving mother reside in a home, these three, but the greatest of these is a loving mother.'

That seems to me to be an interesting application of that tremendous chapter on the relevance of love to family life. It was Paul talking of his affection for the Thessalonian converts and making an analogy with parental love that was our starting point. Because of his affection for these believers, Paul, verse 8 says, was well pleased to impart to them, not only the gospel of God but his own life because they'd become so very dear to him. Putting this another way, Paul and his fellow-preachers lived transparent

lives before their converts. They modelled, or allowed others to see in themselves at first-hand, the same values they wished to instill through their teaching. It reminded me of Dorothy Law Nolte's saying that:

'If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn

If a child lives with hostility, he learns to fight

If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be shy

If a child lives with shame, he learns to feel guilty

If a child lives with tolerance, he learns to be patient

If a child lives with encouragement, he learns to have confidence

If a child lives with praise, he learns appreciation

If a child lives with fairness, he learns justice

If a child lives with security, he learns to have faith

If a child lives with approval, he learns to like himself

If a child lives with acceptance and friendship, he learns to find love in the world.'

By imparting our own selves in many of these ways, a home can be filled with godly character traits, deep relationships, unfeigned faith and lasting memories - just like the homes of Eunice and Lois before her. 2 Timothy 1 which gives us this

glimpse of the family background of Timothy only serves to emphasize further the kind of spiritual legacy it can produce with God's help.

Now some parents would say they'd done their best and yet their children have gone away from the Lord. Does this reflect on the training they gave? No, that doesn't necessarily follow at all. Some parents who live exemplary Christian lives don't always see the spiritual progress they long for in their children's lives. That's why in commenting a moment ago on Timothy's family background, we spoke about the kind of spiritual legacy it can produce by God's help. There's simply no formula, and there are no guarantees. Increasingly, the burden of responsibility shifts from the parents to the children themselves. When God is pictured as a parent in Hosea 11 or Isaiah 1 there can be no doubt who's at fault for Israel's waywardness - it could only be Israel that's to blame. When Proverbs 22:6 says "Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it," that's not a guaranteed promise or invariable rule; it's a general principle.

Now going back to the point we were making about the need to impart more than words of instruction but also our own values, our own selves - which had been Paul's example, again it recalls Deuteronomy 6: that section on God's family guidance we've referred to a couple of times already. Verse 6 says: "these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart." How important that is! Just as parents' hearts are to be permeated with God's love, here we have another fundamental principle for our life at home. There's little chance of children becoming

gripped by God's Word and the reality of God if their parents don't display it. The hearts of parents are to be captivated with the truth of God and his Word.

So many things are 'caught' by our children rather than explicitly 'taught' to them. If we say Christianity is very important but don't go to church, they'll actually learn that Christianity isn't important. The same will happen if we teach the importance of faith but then worry about everything ourselves. If we piously talk about taking our problems to the Lord, but then make our own independent decisions, again the effect will be opposite to what's desired. If we say money isn't very important but then ourselves live materialistically it'll be very unlikely they'll get the message.

Imparting our own selves to them is also a costly thing in terms of time. The old adage about quality time being more important than quantity time is probably not as true as we'd like to believe when we lead busy lives. Maybe we can watch their favourite TV programme with them and use it as a discussion topic to debrief them on any media message that's been put over. I think it's extremely important to expose whatever values aren't biblical values, especially when sinful behaviours - like violence and immorality - are being glamourized.

3. TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

There's a story I enjoy about a woman whose name was Bonnie who was hospitalized just before Christmas. The hospital room she was in seemed like a Christmas floral shop as she awakened after surgery. Family and friends had been so thoughtful and sent in lots of lovely red poinsettias, yule logs - even a miniature Christmas tree!

When the nurse came in and pulled back the pale green privacy curtain, a voice said 'Yep, I like your flowers.' The voice belonged to her roommate, Ginger, who turned out to be a small, forty-something, curly-haired woman with Down's syndrome. She volunteered a little background about the group home where she lived. "Doc's going to fix my foot." she announced, and as soon as that happened she seemed pretty desperate to get back in time for her Christmas party. Ginger also talked quite freely to Bonnie's visitors that evening, keeping her eye specially on Adam, who was a handicapped 5-year old. "Yep, I like your Adam," she declared later.

The contrast between the two sides of the room couldn't have been more pronounced. For Ginger's bedside was stark and bare, with no cards and no flowers. Bonnie decided she ought to even things up a bit. She'd received so many decorative gifts after all, she could surely spare one or two to give to her roommate. She picked up the red-candled centrepiece with holly sprigs, but then hesitated and put it back thinking about how good it would

look on the Christmas dinner table. Next, she picked up the poinsettias but then suddenly thought about how the deep red plants would brighten up the entrance porch of their house, matching the curtains. She put that back as well. And so she continued, making excuses: flowers were beginning to wilt, friends would be offended ... in the end she couldn't part with anything. Instead she decided that she'd buy something for Ginger from the hospital shop the next day.

Before that could happen, the lady with the sweet trolley gave Ginger a small green Christmas wreath with a red bow. Ginger was so thrilled with it she pointed it out to all Bonnie's visitors that evening. At breakfast the following morning, the nurse told Ginger that the van from the home was already on its way to take her back. At first Bonnie was so pleased for Ginger that she'd be back in the home in time for the Christmas party she'd really been looking forward to. But then she realized the hospital gift shop wouldn't be open for another couple of hours, so she wouldn't be able to get that present for Ginger. Once more she wondered if she could part with any of her many beautiful gifts, but couldn't come to a decision.

As the nurse helped Ginger into her wheelchair, suddenly she said "Wait!" and hobbled over to Bonnie's bed and gently laid her solitary wreath on her lap. 'Merry Christmas' she said. "You've been so kind. You're a nice lady." Then Ginger gave Bonnie a big hug. Bonnie was lost for words. Her moist eyes fell on the small wreath she was now holding. It had been Ginger's only gift, she thought, and she gave it to me. What a Christmas message that was for Bonnie!

So often the problem with Christmas is that with all the presents we receive from family and friends, we can become very self-centred and selfish. How different from the Lord Jesus, who gave all He had - that's the reality of the Christmas story. Nowhere is it better summed up than in 2 Corinthians 8:9. That verse says: "... though He was rich, yet for [our] sakes He became poor, that [we] through His poverty might become rich" (RV).

All this connects with the fourth point from the account of Paul's pastoral care for the Thessalonian church. We've been considering First Thessalonians chapter 2 from verse 7. First of all, Paul said that he and his fellow-workers had been "gentle among [them], as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children." It was that analogy that attracted us to consider Paul's pastoral concern as basically being characteristic of what God intends our family life to be like. Secondly, he spoke of his "fond ... affection" for the Thessalonians (v.8), and from that we picked up on the love parents should have, first and foremost for God, then for their family.

Thirdly, Paul says "we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us." That thought led us to each parent's need to live lives of transparent integrity - living out in consistent practice all the good things we say and teach.

Now we come to the fourth point. Paul goes on in verse 9 to say: "For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship; how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God." Doesn't it remind us of Ginger and her selflessness in giving her Christmas wreath

to Bonnie? Paul and the other evangelists had shown selfless diligence in that they'd also worked to support themselves financially while sharing the Christian message with the Thessalonians.

Again, how typical of parents. Paul's words to Timothy in his first letter chapter 5 verse 8 come to mind. He says: "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." It's certainly an area of responsibility that Christian parents are commanded to take seriously - to the point of planning their families to suit their income. As if to reinforce it, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:14: "For children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children." Of course, that provision must first of all be in terms of love, time and attention. It's extremely sad when material gifts are given by way of compensation for a parent's recurring absences. On the other hand, many stories could be told of the self-sacrificing of parents in order to provide a treat or even an essential for a child.

The virtuous woman of Proverbs chapter 31 gives us a biblical example of this selfless and self-sacrificing behaviour of putting the good of others in the family first. Even in introducing her in verse 10 by saying "her worth is far above jewels," we get a hint that there's something much more important in family life than money and materialism. By the way, talking of her worth, do we aim to build up the self-esteem of those in the family around us? Some Christians say they have a difficulty with terms like 'self-esteem' or 'self-image', and they can so easily be tainted with selfish pride, but basically all I mean by building self-esteem is:

do we pass on encouragement and appropriate compliments in order to help each family member feel valued and worthwhile, as this woman did in Proverbs 31? Listen:

“Her children rise up and bless her; her husband also, and he praises her, saying: ‘Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all.’ Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. Give her the product of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.”

We pass over verse 11 which says, “the heart of her husband trusts in her”. That was a previous point about lives of transparent integrity. This woman was a help and confidant to her husband who held a responsible position. And so we come to verse 15 which tells us “she rises also while it is still night and gives food to her household.” Talk about selfless diligence - she knew all about it! Wasn't this just the way Paul had mothered the young Thessalonian believers? She's got a real 'cottage industry' going here in Proverbs 31.

“She looks for wool and flax and works with her hands ... She is like merchant ships; she brings her food from afar ... She considers a field and buys it; from her earnings she plants a vineyard ... She senses that her gain is good; her lamp does not go out at night. She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hand grasp the spindle. She extends her hand to the poor, and she stretches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet ... She makes

linen garments and sells them, and supplies belts to the tradesmen ... She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.'

I can believe that! There was no room for idleness in her life. But the picture I get is not one of rushing competitiveness between different compartments of her life and all with stress and conflict of interests between home and career say. Rather the picture of a wife and mother fulfilled in the use of her skills and talents yet whose family comes first - a real 'worker at home' as Paul described Christian women to Titus in chapter 2 and verse 5. Here was someone committed to her family's well-being and taking domestic responsibilities seriously while at the same time trading profitably in a successful business enterprise. We see this especially in her skilful provision of food and clothing for her family. She'd got the balance right, without sacrificing anything of her dignity as a person, as a woman.

But it's not the thought of success I want to leave with you from this picture, rather the idea of a gracious mother. Overall, the chapter describes her with strong arms, open hands reaching out, clothed with dignity, speaking kindness, fearing the Lord, praised by her works and acclaimed by her family. Yes, she was someone for whom family mattered!

4. PARENTS BEHAVING WELL

We've been talking about raising children - perhaps the biggest issue in family life. Someone once gave a talk with the title: 'How to raise your children'. Then the speaker himself had children of his own and the title of the talk changed to the more modest: 'Some suggestions to Parents'. The next time he gave it, the title had again changed. Now it was: 'Feeble hints to fellow-strugglers' and finally it became: 'Anyone out there got a few words of wisdom?!'

It's a daunting subject, one in which we have to acknowledge our need to lean not on our own understanding but on God and to trust in his Word. The Bible is actually full of recorded family experiences. How well Daniel's parents had moulded his value system in years of early training so that he could stand firm and loyal to his principles when he suddenly found himself in a big city and in a foreign culture surrounded by lots of temptations.

On the other hand, from the stories of David and Eli we can observe the effects of professional neglect on family life. There's a terrible danger in parents being overcommitted outside the home and as a result not being available to give consistent input to their children's training. Sometimes rich, successful parents sit by their garden swimming pools and wonder why their son or daughter prefers to live in squalor down in a nearby commune. Maybe they feel more valued there. Parents can be pre-occupied with providing a degree of lifestyle where material things take

over. No amount of material things can compensate for an absent Dad, or Mum. What price the rough and tumble a toddler has with his Dad; building rapport which can be cashed in on later?

The Bible perspective can be found in Psalm 127: "Children are a gift of the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them." In the ups and downs of daily domestic bliss, this is a healthy reminder that children are a precious gift from God, a trust given into our charge, and our supreme task is to equip them to hit the mark in divine service.

Job's a shining example to us of the need to pray for our kids lifelong. Job chapter 1 tells us he offered sacrifices regularly just in case any of his children had sinned against God. Some parents even have a day of prayer and fasting each week for their kids, seeking God's guidance for them in their careers and relationships. As well as like Job in being conscious of his children's shortcomings, we can also ask God to help us in our own shortcomings as parents. We can regularly request that he'll compensate for our weaknesses and failings in a way that will ensure those young charges he entrusted to us won't be damaged in any way and we'll especially want to ask him to preserve them from the evil influences of the world, won't we? Yes, prayer is so vital!

As our children get older, the challenges increase. There can be a tendency for a parent to wish to fulfil his or her own dreams through the children rather than let them be what they want

to be and are suited for. And sometimes our own youthful and reckless experiences can fill us with quite unjustified suspicions and fears about their intentions as they become more independent. I wonder if at least a part of Saul's jealousy of David might have been due to his frustration that it wasn't his own son Jonathan who defeated the giant and led the army out to battle. It seems clear that we need to let children find their own niche and encourage them at what they're naturally good at.

Jephthah, of whom we read in Judges chapter 11, is an example of someone who didn't fit in at home. In fact, he was driven out of the family home. What a tragedy, for he quickly got in with the wrong crowd who gave him the kind of acceptance and esteem he never enjoyed at home. It's sad today to talk to young people who've effectively been driven from home by well-meaning but misunderstanding parents. It would break their heart to realize that their son or daughter's foolish behaviour - which they find so hurtful - was due in part at least to their mismatched expectations or unrealistic ambitions for their child.

It's really good to read through the Bible's family histories with a parent's eye and a heart that's open to learn from the bad examples as well as the good. We can see the bad results of favouritism from Isaac and Rebekah's family. We need to be open to all God can teach us through his Word in these days when the prevailing idea of secularism - the attitude of being sceptical of religious instruction; and the idea of relativism - the notion that there are no absolute values, rights or wrongs, as well as the idea of individualism - the put-yourself-first mentality - all three conspire together to put the family unit so much at risk.

God's wisdom for family life may not always be fashionable but it's never dated. A growing body of social research shows that such things as 2-parent families, marital fidelity, fatherhood and parental authority, together with faith in God are all highly beneficial factors in the well-being of families today. And no wonder, for that's what the Bible teaches!

I wonder if we might consider - those of us who are parents at any rate - resolving to be more authentic Christians, starting with our family life. For that seems to be the next point, Paul's fifth point, which he comes to in First Thessalonians chapter 2 and now verse 10. He says there: "You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers."

Did you notice how Paul lived? Devoutly, justly and blamelessly. And that was no empty boast for he was holding himself accountable to others, and God, and calling on them as witnesses. Remember this is all in the context of the apostle's parent-like care for these believers who were his spiritual children. What this points up for us is the value of every parent living a spiritually genuine life before their children, and spouse too, for that matter. Remembering what we've said earlier about our actions weighing more than our words and about how quick children are to see inconsistencies in us, we need to make sure that all that we say is fully matched and exemplified by our own actions in say the handling of money and possessions; and the way we conduct our business-life relative to the priority matter of our service for the Lord, and so on. It won't do if our children

see us compromising our standards or applying double standards or just cutting corners. We need to be seen by them to be authentic.

There's a simple little poem that sums up a lot of what we're saying. I noticed it hanging on the wall of a house I was visiting in Scotland and copied it down for it was around the time our own family was coming along. This is what it says:

"A careful one I want to be ...

A little fellow follows me.

I do not care to go astray,

For fear he'll go the self-same way.

I cannot once escape his eyes ...

What he sees me do ... he tries.

Like me ... he says he wants to be ...

That little chap that follows me.

He thinks that I am big and fine ...

He believes in every word of mine.

The base in me ... he must not see ...

That little chap that follows me.

I must remember as I go ...

Through summer sun and winter snow ...

I'm building for the years to be ...

That little chap who follows me."

We've thought previously about the woman in the family from the point of view of Proverbs chapter 31. Now it would be good to look at the man in the family as viewed in Psalm 112.

"How blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in His commandments. His descendants will be mighty on earth; the generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures forever. Light arises in the darkness for the upright; he is gracious and compassionate and righteous. It is well with the man who is gracious and lends; he will maintain his cause in judgment. For he will never be shaken; the righteous will be remembered forever. He will not fear evil tidings; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the LORD ... He has given freely to the poor, his righteousness endures forever ..."

With its emphasis on the qualities of being God-fearing, righteous and upright, the description of this man about the house fits very well with Paul's description in 1 Thessalonians - remember the stress on a devout, just and blameless lifestyle? But how can this form of spiritual authenticity come about? How can we better ensure that our domestic lives are like this? What was the very first thing said about the man in Psalm 112? "How blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in His commandments."

Surely this is the heart of the matter and is cultivated by spending time daily as a family around the open Bible in the home, perhaps at the meal table. Not that we should attempt to impart eternal truths to youngsters in unending devotions. No, we need to be fairly brief, illustrative and ready with relevant applications for their age-level. What can be better for the family unit than if, after the homespun chat across the meal table, we bring our family matters to God. Here the genuine Christianity of parents can and will be proved as we bring our family decisions and problems before God and then thank him together for his help once we receive it. God will be seen to be real in our lives and not just a topic in church. The parent's authentic example will set a foundational example for the children's lifestyle - one in which it will be natural to talk about God and to God. Maybe, you say, that's not been our habit. Well, why not resolve to begin this new thing?

Sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a life.

5. THE DISCIPLINE OF DISCIPLINING

I like the story of the little boy who after he's been put to bed shouts downstairs that he wants a glass of water. Now for some reason Dad decides it's not appropriate to go back upstairs and give him a glass of water, so he simply says "No, you can't have any". Five minutes later the same little voice from upstairs asks for water. Same answer, and he's told not to ask again. Five minutes later "Can I have a glass of water?" Dad begins to get frustrated and says, "Listen, I said no, and told you not to ask again. Now if you ask one more time, I'm going to come up there and spank you. Now go to sleep." Dad just begins to think he's got away with it when the silence is again broken after a few minutes: "Dad, when you come up to spank me, will you bring a glass of water, please?"

Discipline isn't easy at any age, and it seems to get harder. As parents, we sometimes have doubts as to whether a punishable offence has been committed or was it an accident, or how much can be put down to him or her being off-colour today? It's not easy, we all know that. But this is the subject we get on to as we complete our study of what Paul says to the Thessalonians in his first letter, chapter 2 and verses 7-11. Here's verse 11: "You know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children." We're on safe ground applying this for as Paul reminds us family life is the original setting.

In the verse we've shared from Paul, it was the father who was doing the exhorting and warning; just as earlier it had been the mother who was nurturing or training the child. It reminds me of the father who complained that his son thought he was an ogre because whenever he came home from work there was a list of things for which he was to discipline his son. Sure, it would be tough for the boy in that situation to see his Dad not as a Cop but as a Dad. Even though in the society of Bible lands, and in those times, the father may well have wielded the big stick while mother did all the child-rearing stuff, things like that do change and today it's expected, and appropriate, for Dad to roll up his sleeves and get involved in aspects of child-rearing - starting with changing nappies or diapers - while Mum will play her part in applying discipline. That way the child doesn't learn to favour one parent and dread the other.

In Proverbs 24:3,4 – we read: “By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; and by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.” Of course, this is not so much the house but the home and its various relationships that are being built up - and their development requires wisdom, understanding and knowledge.

Certainly, on the topic we've already mentioned - discipline - wisdom and understanding is called for. There's a big debate these days about any form of corporal punishment in the home, now that it's been abandoned in schools. It takes wisdom and understanding to make a clear difference between physical correction and physical abuse; and also between disciplining and demeaning. Making a public spectacle of our child will be demeaning. Correction can be privately applied later. With

checks and balances like these in place we can say that the Bible definitely approves physical discipline, for example Proverbs 13 verse 24 says: “He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly” (NKJV).

There's real practical wisdom in this, of course, just as discomfort reveals physical dangers, so discipline alerts the child to social dangers. It would be very remiss of us as parents not to do this. But we must be in total control of ourselves when we discipline our children. Understanding and knowledge come into play, too, in discerning between an undesirable act and a direct challenge to parental authority.

We found it good advice in our experience of young children not to turn mealtimes into battlegrounds. A child cannot be scolded into eating. There's no point in fighting a losing battle and meals are cases in point where the child's stubborn will may easily get the upper hand. It's better to say: “okay you can leave your dinner, if you wish, but listen there are no sweets and biscuits before tea time”. Then, at tea-time, you re-heat and re-serve what was left over from dinner time. If the child doesn't listen to Mum or Dad, he or she will soon listen to a rumbling tummy! Another undesirable act where punishment isn't appropriate is in the case of breakages occurring during play. Correction is necessary, though, when a child retorts: “I will not” or “Shut up”.

Wise parents build their family life with lots of loving esteem, open communication and fair discipline. And discipline needs to be fair to be effective. Inconsistent discipline will make a child insecure; whereas children actually long for consistent discipline - there's security in knowing where the boundaries are. When

children 'test the limits' we might think of what they're doing as being like a security officer trying all the doors of a building hoping to find them safely locked - just checking. When youngsters get older they can even be invited to participate in setting the rules. The rules then become 'theirs' and strangely they're often stricter than we would dare to be! We can also work with them at associating privilege with responsibility. To sum up, with discipline, children are entitled to know what the rules are in advance; to have correction privately administered; with the violation and its consequence clearly explained; and to be assured of our love and concern for them at all times.

Well, it's probably time to refresh our acquaintance with Paul's sixth point in First Thessalonians 2. This was where he spoke of "exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children". That's an interesting mixture - an interesting balance, isn't it? He exhorted, encouraged and implored. That would cover both negative and positive feedback. Sometimes we do need to concentrate on the doughnut rather than on the hole: on what's there as opposed to what's missing. It's really important in building meaningful relationships with our own children to compliment good behaviour, or at least to give balanced criticism - especially as youngsters get older and become less pliable, possibly more insecure during those teen years, and certainly less impressed with our advice. But we can still share encouragements and warnings by talking - perhaps when doing something together with them like a mutual hobby or during family recreation time. That way it doesn't come across as a straight lecture.

I'm so grateful for that short verse in Luke 2:52 that says: "Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men". As a holy teenager he underwent mental, physical, spiritual and social development. The teenage years for all of us are years when we benefit from lots of reassurance and unconditional love. Keeping our expectations as parents realistic, while affirming and accepting our kids can help prevent them looking to negative methods of getting attention instead from their peers.

Still keeping Paul's point on positive influence in mind, it's useful to check out the great resource of parental wisdom in Proverbs. There a father talks to his son - like Paul, he exhorts and charges. Some 14 times in the first 7 chapters we come across the words 'my son' prefacing some timeless piece of fatherly instruction. There's warning against keeping the wrong sort of company as well as against laziness and immorality; but also encouragement to seek God's guidance and to be wise.

If you find living the Christian life very difficult because not everyone at home is a Christian, let me just say that I remember hearing a delightful meditation on the Lord Jesus' own home circumstances. The speaker felt a window was opened on the Lord's home life when He said in Mark 6:4, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household." The occasion was the Lord's second rejection at Nazareth where he'd been brought up. Perhaps the sadness in his voice that day could almost be felt. Divisions in the home had cut him keenly and the hurts of some 20 or more years surface in this remark. Christian, take heart, he knows what it's like to have a difficult daily life at home.

And human nature being what it is, we can well imagine his half-brothers being resentful of their perfect older brother. If yours is a divided home, speak to him about your problems in the confidence that he, too, has experienced them at first-hand.

Being a parent must be one of the toughest jobs in the world, but it can be so rewarding. Ask any roomful of kids what it was that set their faith ablaze and a few will say friends or youth workers, but the majority will point to parental influence. That's why we need to have just every bit as positive an influence as that Paul speaks about in 1 Thessalonians 2:11 - exhorting, comforting, charging.

But, remember, children learn far more from example than methods and instructions. Enthusiasm for God will be 'caught,' not 'taught'!

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