

GET OFFA MY CASE!

GODLY PARENTING
OF AN
ANGRY TEEN

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Get Offa My Case!

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INTRODUCTION

SO, WHAT'S A CHRISTIAN PARENT TO DO?

“I’m so tired of living in this prison! If I have to be in by nine, I’m leaving. Nobody else’s parents treat them like you treat me. Tom’s mom said I could come and live with them if I want to. And if you lock the door like you said, then I’m outta here. I don’t care. I’ll do what I want to do when I want to do it. You can’t make me do anything. Just get offa my case!”

Living with an angry, defiant teenager will drain the peace and sense of safety from any home. Most seriously, for the Christian parent, godly parenting with spiritual, mental and emotional balance becomes as difficult as trying to keep your footing in the ocean when the waves are rough. On the one hand the waves keep pounding the top half of your body as they roll toward the shore, at the same time you have to fight the strong undertow that is dragging your legs out from under you. In this book I’m going to use this rough seas metaphor because it can help us think about the rough waves of opposition and anger from our teens and the threatening undertow of our temptations to anger and fear and feelings of frustration that may emerge from our own

hearts. Both, if left unchecked, will fill our homes with turmoil, fear, and pain and will undermine our godly parenting desires.

Sue's sophomore daughter is as big as she is. When Tina comes home from school she smells like cigarette smoke, doesn't talk to her mother, sequesters herself in her room and won't answer Sue when she calls her or asks her a question. If Sue tries to correct Tina or asks her what she is doing or where she's been, her daughter yells at her to "mind your own f***** business." Sue's own spiritual balance takes a big hit during these times. She's tempted to yell back at her daughter, to threaten Tina and even use some of the same foul language in her own anger. Sue has spent many restless hours worrying, feeling frustrated and defeated, and sometimes just wishing Tina would just leave. Home is much more pleasant when Tina is not there, but worry also nags at Sue when Tina is away. Sue's unsettledness and the unhappiness at home drains her energy and leads her to distraction. She finds it hard to focus clearly on the needs of Tina's brother and sisters, keep her balance with other family needs and even to concentrate during her quiet time with the Lord. The "fight" never ends. Keeping her footing in these rough waters is hard.

Maintaining stability in a home with an angry teenager is no easy task. The constant pounding and unpredictable waves created by a defiant and disrespectful teen bombard us within and without. Our attitudes and reactions, like an undertow, throw us off balance from within. The sinfulness of our own hearts directs our angry reactions in ways that can drag us into saying and doing things that only make the problems worse.

The intensity of a teen's angry attitudes, words and actions can be intimidating. In addition to the turbulence she creates in the home, there is also the real possibility that she will do some irreversible damage to herself or others. In the face of threats to run away, destroy something or hurt someone or herself, we may be terrified that our child might do what they threaten to do. The threats could be realistic because we may have seen them become more and more bold with angry outbursts, take increasingly dangerous risks or do physical damage to our home. Their

rage can be violent. We've encountered their tirades when that they haven't liked us trying to hold the line on correct standards of behavior. *So what's a Christian parent to do?*

The Most Important Question

This is an important question, but it's not the first one we must ask ourselves if we are going to meet this turbulence in a godly way. The question we must begin with is *What's a Christian parent to be like in these difficult situations?* This question is the subject of Part 1 and focuses on how parents can keep their footing in spite of the force of external waves of rebellion. It addresses the fierce undertow of responses that threaten to emerge from our own hearts and will compound our home problems. Solomon's wisdom is critical to heed here: "Keep (or *guard* in the NIV) your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23). By keeping or guarding our hearts in these times, we will be able to keep our footing in rough waters. We will find the courage we need to persevere righteously and the hope we need to experience the peace, joy and love of Christ—even while the waves keep pounding against us.

In Part 2, I talk about specific, strategic biblical counsel that parents need to bring to bear on their angry, defiant teen. The aim of this conversation will be to show him respect in a way he's probably not experienced. This will move him into the deep, threatening waters of accountability. He probably won't want to go there willingly, but your respectful approach to him is going to drag him there anyway. Such counsel will help you address the waves of anger and threats of violence or defiance that come at you, and to make that turbulence something that your teen will feel. You will walk alongside as a dad who has come to understand more of his biblical parenting identity and his son's young adult identity, a father who works to show biblical respect to his son. This discussion drags his son to an intimidating, even frightening, place. This discussion has the effect of a riptide on an ocean swimmer; it is a quiet, powerful current that draws his

son into threatening, deep waters where he does not want to go on his own.

In Part 3, I talk about specific biblical actions you can take to let your teenager sink in the threatening, deep waters of accountability. It is these that we pray God may use to motivate our child to make cooperative, respectful and responsible choices—ultimately for the right reasons. He’s been bringing the pounding waves of troubledness and discomfort into your home for some time. Now you are going to make it evident that this problem of troubledness and discomfort is for him to bear, not you and the rest of the family. He’s been handing you the problem for some time, now you will learn how to give him the problem while maintaining a spirit of grace and love. You will learn how to use the biblical resources at your disposal to let him feel the weight of his uncooperative, disrespectful decision-making, but always in the context of Christ’s love. You are going to let your teen sink in over his head. You are going to let him gasp. He won’t drown, but God willing and with the Spirit’s intercession, like the prodigal son, who “came to himself” (Luke 15:17), this deep water will humble him and motivate him to cry out for help.

Part 4, is largely autobiographical. Our heavenly Father took my wife, Betty, and me through a stormy sea with one of our six teens. We experienced the pounding waves of his outbursts and the sinful reactions of our own hearts. This part shows you how to grasp the rich resources that your Father in heaven makes available to you when you “pass through the waters” (Isaiah 43:2). It shows you how to make him your delight in the midst of your storm while letting your teen sink in deep water that is over his head so that he, by God’s grace, will call out for help.

One final note about Part 4: My children have all read this section, especially my son, Jed, through whom our Father has been teaching Betty and me to be more like Christ and to be more and more content with Christ. All our kids, including Jed and his wife, have given permission to write about these home experiences from years past. We’re all still sinners. That won’t be resolved till we see the Savior face to face. But the friendships

Introduction

that we all now share and the enjoyment we are able to have in Christ after those years of rough waters are a tribute to God's grace and a testimony to his power.

May our good and gracious Father use this book to give you enjoyment in Christ and make him your heart's desire for the peace of God in your relationship with your difficult teen.

P A R T 1

KEEPING YOUR FOOTING IN ROUGH WATERS

Fear not, for I have redeemed you. . . . When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. . . . For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

—Isaiah 43:1–3

Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Opposition did not surprise him. He does not want it to surprise us either, even when such opposition might be found in our homes: “A person’s enemies will be those of his own household” (Matthew 10:36). When anger erupts, Jesus makes it clear that it is not always provoked by our unrighteous parenting. Of course it can arise in our homes because we have set the stage for it by some of our own parenting patterns, but that is often not the case. “Everyone who does wicked things,” Jesus asserts, “hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed” (John

3:20). Such hatred can come at us from the culture outside our homes and from the heart of an angry teen inside our homes.

What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

—Mark 7:20–23

Godly parenting in a sea of rough water is what this book is about. How can we keep our balance and stability in a home with the turbulence of an angry teen? In Part 1, I look at four resources, or foundational supports: God’s glory, his promises, his Word, and prayer. God has given us these supports to brace ourselves and remain stable *in* rough water. These will give us stability and shore up our own hearts for the important next steps that we must take with our angry teen. Our commitment to these four supports will guarantee that our homes will be places where God’s name is honored and his grace is displayed through us—regardless of our teen’s disposition.

We must not rush past these supports. Just as contractors must pay careful attention when pouring the foundation of a home, we must be careful to build a strong foundation in our own hearts. Some of the recent earthquakes in Japan, Haiti, Indonesia, the Philippines, India and China remind us that a good foundation is critical for standing firm in an earthquake—or against pounding waves. Likewise it’s important that our lives are built on strong supports in order to weather the storms in our homes. It’s not enough to just *do* the right thing with your angry teen. The “right” steps or the “right” words will not be the silver bullet you need to bring peace and harmony to your home. You must *be* the right person doing the right things to experience God’s peace in your home. Part 1 provides you with the foundational supports you need to make the important decisions to which God directs you with your teen.

When God is glorified, all of him is glorified. That means the wonderful grace that characterizes him pours from him in Christ and swells around us and in us because he is a gracious God. His gracious provision of himself will motivate you to “stand” (see Ephesians 6:13–14) and “keep you from stumbling” (Jude 24). His loving promises will encourage you, his Word will instruct you and prayer will position and empower you.

1

KEEPING YOUR FOOTING AS GOD'S GLORY MOTIVATES YOU

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!

—Psalm 57:5

In John 11, Jesus entered a situation that has some similarities to home settings shown in this book. There are some clear differences, but the emotions, thoughts, temptations and maybe some of the words are similar to the ones that your teen is experiencing or has expressed and that may threaten to overwhelm you as well.

Mary and Martha experienced loss. Their brother had died. They were overwhelmed with deep grief for four days. They believed that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had been present. Some of their words seem to be a mixture of resentment and hope. They had obviously talked to each other about the crisis and in their grief came to the same conclusion about Jesus' absence. When Jesus arrived at their home in Bethany, he met each sister separately, and each one said the same thing to him. Martha said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not

have died” (John 11:21). Just a few verses later, Jesus also met Mary in her grief. She said exactly the same thing when she saw him (see verse 32). They had hope in the resurrection at the last days, but they felt hopeless about their immediate loss. They assumed that nothing in the present could bring back their brother.

Like Mary and Martha we experience fear, confusion and a sense of hopelessness in dealing with our angry, defiant teen. We fear for our son’s safety and his and our other children’s spiritual and emotional well-being. Our own sins may compound the anxiety we are feeling. We might be ashamed because turbulence is erupting in our “Christian family,” guilty because of doubts about our parenting skills and worried that reproach will be brought on Christ because the Christian teachings we’ve tried to apply haven’t worked as we thought they should. All these are common reactions of Christian parents in a home with an angry or out of control teen.

Our teen may have some things in common with Mary and Martha too. She may have experienced a great loss or be deeply saddened by a turn of events in her life that seems to last forever (though, maybe in real time, it has only lasted a few hours or, perhaps, days). She may think that her parents have arbitrary and ridiculous expectations and demands, which she believes will never change.

In the midst of the rough water in which Mary and Martha stood, Jesus showed up and directed their hearts and minds to the first truth to which they needed to commit: that God would be glorified in this difficult situation. This hope would be their source for stability in the midst of their immediate fear and present sense of loss, as well as the work of God in the future.

When Jesus first heard of Lazarus’ sickness, he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (John 11:4). Later, at the gravesite, Jesus said to Mary and Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” (v.40). From the outset, Jesus knew that there were going to be waves of confusion, grief, misunderstandings and doubts that would arise

because of Lazarus' death. The counsel Jesus gave the disciples and Mary and Martha in order to keep their footing during this crisis was to hope in "the glory of God."

Nothing is more sufficient for us when we feel threatened by our angry teen than the hope that God's glory will be displayed through the stormy waves that are rolling upon us and our household. The believer's passion and delight is to see God glorified. Our temptation, though, is to be like Peter who began to sink in the Sea of Galilee after Jesus told him to walk on the water toward him. He became concerned with himself, took his eyes off Jesus and looked at the stormy wind and waves (see Matthew 14:28–30). That's when he lost his footing.

Later in the book I'll direct our attention to what practical things you can and should do in these settings to address your teen's anger. But first we need to keep our eyes on Jesus and God's glory.

Satisfaction with God's Glory Gives Stability during Personal Attacks

When Saul was threatening and chasing David, he took refuge in God and found stability in resting in God's glory.

In you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the *storms of destruction* pass by. I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me. . . . Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth! . . . My heart is steadfast.

—Psalm 57:1–2, 5, 7

Stability was the practical outworking of entrusting himself to God's purpose of glorifying himself in the midst of his troubles. By focusing on God's glory David gained a firm footing during his "storms of destruction." He declared, "My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast!" (v. 7).

God's glory is what we should aim for, but our motives are always mixed with other concerns, especially about ourselves.

We can truthfully echo the dad in Mark 9:24 who honestly confessed to Jesus, “I believe, help my unbelief.” We do not need to fear that any doubt within us or turmoil within our homes will defame God. He will be glorified regardless of our failures and weaknesses.

Satisfaction with God’s Glory Advances the Refining Work He Has Begun

When we aim for and are satisfied with God getting glory in our homes, we position ourselves for his refining work. It is our own pride and our lust for respect that often get in the way of God working in our hearts. In the refining fires that we face, God will be glorified, so we can rejoice in our suffering. In these fires he brings us to humble trust and contentment with his wise and glorious purpose.

Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.

—Isaiah 48:10–11

In the wider context of this passage, God is explaining that he disciplines his people to refine them and to lead all things to his glory. Neither in Isaiah’s day nor today do God’s people’s imperfections hinder the refining process or God’s glory. Likewise, neither our parenting nor our teen’s behavior can hinder the work of God. Nothing that eternally matters is truly at risk. God will be glorified by changes he makes in us and through us with his refining fires, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work *in you* will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

Certainty of God’s Glory Trumps Angry Intentions

The testimony of Scripture is that God will make even the wrath of man a display of his glory. The psalmist declared, “Surely the

wrath of man shall praise you” (Psalm 76:10). This was clearly demonstrated in the most violent act of angry men, the crucifixion of the Son of God. Man’s wrath has led to Christ being highly exalted, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, *to the glory of God the Father*” (Philippians 2:10–11). Believing parents can have the same assurance. God will be glorified in and through the anger and wrath that may come at them by way of an angry teen, just as he was glorified by Jesus’ crucifixion.

Contentment with God’s Glory Brings Comfort in Times of Distress

Paul’s example in Romans 10 is valuable. Even though he knew that the Jews “have not all obeyed the gospel” (v. 16), he cited the comfort he derived from knowing that God’s glory was not at risk even though he did not understand God’s mysterious decree about Israel’s rejection of the Messiah. These were his people. Their unbelief was a source of “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” in his heart (Romans 9:2). However, Paul found contentment in the knowledge that ultimately God would be glorified and his loving promise to save all his people would be fulfilled (see Romans 9:1–5; 22–26; 11:1–7; 25–27). “And in this way all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26). Paul didn’t know exactly how all Israel would be saved. But he was confident that God would be glorified in every situation because everything is under his control. He concluded the passage about God’s mysterious decree, painful as it may have been to him, with these remarkable words of praise:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How *unsearchable* are his judgments and *inscrutable* his ways!
For from him and through him and to him are all things. *To him be glory forever. Amen.*

—Romans 11:33, 36

Even in the most baffling experiences of God's providence, believers can celebrate his glory. He is good and he will be glorified even when his judgments and ways are "unsearchable" and "inscrutable."

Pursuit of God's Glory Equips One to Persevere Through Serious Suffering

God's glory is the sole focal point believers will have in heaven after they have passed through great tribulation. It's what will matter when the saints review with 20/20 hindsight the turbulence they experienced in this life.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." . . . These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation . . . and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

—Revelation 7:9–12, 14, 17

As with these saints in glory, we ought to focus on the glory of God despite (or, perhaps, because of) our anguish and tribulation in this life. Jesus affirmed that godly living will invite "tribulation" (John 16:33). Our confidence in God's power and sovereignty to bring about his glory, however, will do in us what it did for the saints in glory and for David in his stormy circumstances when Saul was pursuing him; it will produce in us a steadfast heart (see Psalm 57:7).

The benedictions in Hebrews and Jude, in the larger contexts of suffering, urge us to persevere with great hope:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, *to whom be glory forever and ever*. Amen.

—Hebrews 13:20–21

*. . . be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever—*Jude 24–25

Conclusion

God wants us to glorify him and enjoy him forever. His sovereignty makes certain that he will be glorified in all circumstances, even in the storms of our lives. He wants his presence and his glory to be the primary source of our contentment. Sin and anger will not dethrone him, surprise him, defeat him or embarrass him. Our crisis is “for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (John 11:4).

In the rough waters of angry teen behaviors and attitudes, before we take any action to hold our sons or daughters accountable, we need to realign our hearts and minds to care preeminently about God's glory. Other desires for our home and our teens are not necessarily wrong, but they must be put behind this one. We need to submit our wills to his. We need to remind ourselves that even in our turmoil, as a child of the light, God will indeed be glorified. His glory is not at risk. Again, hear the words of Jesus to Mary and Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” (John 11:40). Thank him for being in control of the storm and for his victory in it and through it. Our commitment to and confidence in God's glory throughout the storm will free us to powerfully, lovingly and respectfully intervene to restore a calm sea in our hearts and our homes.