

you've been looking at? It could be yours. All you have to do is . . .), and guilt ("I remember when your father was a happy man"). Because we get short-term responses, we think we are successful, not realizing that our efforts will not yield a long-term harvest of obedience.

But are we really successful parents? Is this actually parenting? Do our kids understand why they should obey? Do they want to obey? Is their behavior motivated by a heart sense of what is good, right, and true? Do the kids see life from the helicopter view, that is, a bigger, grander perspective on things than just the present situation? And does this bigger view of things help them understand themselves, life, God, others, right and wrong, their own motivations and thoughts, and so on? Do they feel any remorse whatsoever when they don't obey? Do they understand why they need authority and why they tend to chafe against it? Are they changing, growing, and morally maturing as human beings? Or are they simply succumbing to the power of someone bigger than them, already dreaming of the day when they will be out from under the constraints they now must submit to even though they don't really want to? When our children are young, we sometimes find it difficult to keep the big picture in view. We are tempted to grab any tool at our disposal to get our children to do what we want them to do. We easily forget that we are called to prepare them to live God's way in God's world.

There really is a much, much better way to parent our children! The Bible is filled with rich perspectives on life that can radically alter the way we think about life and the way we live every day. This book is dedicated to just one of those realities: eternity. Let's consider how the reality of forever can shape the way parents think about parenting.

FOREVER GIVES YOU A REASON TO BE SERIOUS ABOUT PARENTING

Eternity reminds parents that this life is not all there is. It sets before us the truth that this present life is not an ultimate

FOREVER AND PARENTING

Many parents have reduced parenting to a neat system designed to get their kids to do stuff. With the proper set of regulations and corresponding set of punishments, supported by well-placed threats and manipulations, they successfully control the behavior of their children. They call this control "parenting." The problem with this system is that if all parents do is regulate and control their children's behavior, when the children are out of the home and out from under parental control, they will have nothing to guide them. Since their obedience was not formed out of desires of the heart to do what is right, but out of fear of punishment, when they are outside of that system, they will have little internal motivation to obey.

This kind of parenting has no past and no future; it has no orienting big-picture worldview that helps children see that doing what is right makes sense. All it has is this moment. If we coerce our children into serving our will for this moment, we feel successful as parents. So we regulate our children's behavior by threat ("You don't want to know what will happen if I have to come up these stairs one more time!"), manipulation ("You know that mountain bike that

Forever

destination for our kids, but a preparation for a final destination. The existence of forever forces parents to acknowledge the inescapable conclusion that life has consequences. Our actions and choices have a greater significance than their present results tell us. The choices we make, the investments we make, and the decisions that we make all have eternal consequences. (More about this later.) We cannot take what the Bible says seriously and buy into the self-centered, pleasure-focused materialism of Western culture that essentially says life is all about play and the person who has the most toys wins. The fact is that life has a plot, and the plot (creation—fall—redemption—destiny) moves all of us toward a destiny. We have to look through the long lens of eternity to understand what God has called us to as parents.

I wonder how many of us are trying to squeeze into an already too busy schedule the task of being God's tool for the formation of our kids' souls. How many of us are too busy pursuing that elusive American dream to have time to invest in the development of our children's hearts? How many of us are sticking our kids somewhere with someone in some kind of activity so we can continue to do the things necessary to achieve the lifestyle of material acquisition and pleasurable experiences that we have named the "good life"? How many of us are trying to squeeze hundred-dollar conversations into dime moments? How many of us are quickly upset when our children misbehave or have a crisis that needs our attention because we don't have the time to respond in a way that would be truly productive for their growth? Are you making time to instill life-transforming perspectives in your children or are you on the fly just doing what works to get them to obey?

How many of us in our irritation personalize the behavior of our children because they are in the way of things we are seeking to accomplish? How many of us are forming a life around this significant calling rather than trying to squeeze it into whatever is left in a schedule that is shaped by the pursuit of some personal dream?

Forever and Parenting

The bottom-line question is this: how many of us parent with eternity in view? Do we view and respond to our children with the radical thought that these little ones are forever beings inescapably marching toward a destiny of some kind? Are we committed to the fact that as parents we cannot live for the moment? We must always have the long view of life in our sights. After all, we have mysteries of the universe to unfold to our children that will alter everything they think about themselves and the world they live in—and one of the most important mysteries is the existence of eternity. How many of us are willing to make personal, career, and familial sacrifices because we grasp the eternal significance of the task that God has called us to?

FOREVER DEFINES YOU AND YOUR KIDS

Forever reminds us that our children were created for something vastly bigger than their happiness or ours. Forever tells us that our children will never exist at the center of their universe. Forever tells us that our children will not write their own stories, nor will we write their stories. Forever reminds us that our children do not belong to us; they belong to God. As parents we are God's agents, commissioned to advance his agenda.

You see, there would be no such thing as eternity if there were not a God who rules over all things and orders the world according to his own wisdom. Eternity forces us to face that we live in a world where we are not the ultimate. We simply cannot overstate the importance of this recognition in the lives of our children. Forever requires us to deal with the reality that we have been born into a world of authority.

As a parent, I cannot do whatever I want to do whenever I want to do it with my children. The authority that I have is representative authority. I am called to represent God in the lives of my children. Forever requires me, as a parent, not just to look outward

to define where I want my family to go, but to look upward for my sense of identity, meaning, and purpose.

Why is this important? Because if you are a parent, you have given birth to little self-sovereigns who will want to rule their lives for the purpose of their own self-defined comfort. I never had any of my children say to me, "Dad, if you could exercise clearer authority in my life by giving more rules, I would feel so loved." No, our children again and again fell into thinking that life was all about them and that they were the only authority they needed.

Have you ever seen how babies stiffen their bodies in anger? The cry that accompanies their stiff bodies is not a cry of pain or neediness; it's a cry of anger. If you have made the tragic mistake of getting in the way of what your little one wants, even though that infant is not yet in possession of language, he or she is telling you off. That child is saying, "Oh no you don't! You will not do that to me! I love you and have a wonderful plan for your life! I am the Lord!" Children will again and again insert themselves in the center of their world and make it all about them. They will tell themselves over and over that they are autonomous and self-sufficient. They will demand their own way and will not esteem the authority that God, who rules over all, has placed in their lives. They will think that the happiness of the moment is what is ultimate. So children need to be rescued from themselves again and again. You can rescue your children by introducing to them something vastly bigger than themselves. You will need to introduce them to the ultimate fact of facts, the one fact that gives meaning to every other fact, the fact of the existence, character, and plan of God. They will need to understand God's plot (creation - fall - redemption - destiny) and their place in it, or they will be a danger to themselves. As the parent onsite, you must tell yourself repeatedly that your children do not belong to you. They are forever beings, who by their very nature belong to God. Your children have not been given to you to make your life easier, as if they are your little God-given indentured servants. They do not

exist to be props for your reputation or trophies of your success. They are not yours to clone in your image. They are not vehicles to live out your unfulfilled dreams. You must face the profound truth that your children belong to their Creator, and that from their first breath they are marching toward a destiny. This is who God created them to be. Your job is to help them to understand who they are and who God is and what life is all about, so that in the various situations and relationships of their lives they will live in a way that is consistent with God's plot.

Maybe you're thinking, "I don't know how to do this." Well, God has helped you. He has created his world in such a way that the physical things around you point to his existence (see Psalm 19 and Romans 1). He did this so that wherever we look we will be reminded of him and know that, like the rest of creation, we belong to him. For example, I could see God's handiwork one day when I was making bread. I had added yeast, sugar, salt, and some oil to warm water. I was watching the yeast bloom, and I was thinking that this chemical process came out of the mind of God. As I added flour to the mixture, I knew what was going to happen. The yeast would interact with the gluten of the flour, creating a gas, and this plasticine-like substance would begin to expand. And when baked, it would be a light, airy loaf with a crispy crust. Then I realized that there are thousands of chemical physical processes that I depend on and that God created them all. It was a moment of worship for me.

About then, my son came in the door from school. I looked up and said, "Ethan, have you ever thought about yeast?"

"Yeah, Dad," he said, "As I was coming home from school, I was thinking yeast is cool."

"I'm serious," I said, and I went through the process with him. "This is just one of thousands of these processes that came out of the mind of God." And then jokingly I said, "And if God hadn't created yeast, all of life would be a cracker." He laughed and said, "That's deep."

Forever

Reminding your children of the existence of God doesn't mean delivering self-righteous parental sermons at points of disobedience ("You know God is watching, and he could crush you like a bug"). No, it means getting from dough to God and back again a dozen times a day.

FOREVER TELLS YOU YOUR CHILD'S GREATEST NEED

The word *need* can be fuzzy and ill-defined. We use the term loosely. If *need* means "essential for life," then the vast majority of what we say we need we don't actually need. When we misunderstand or wrongly define our needs, we often turn blessings into demands and feel entitled to things that we don't need at all. We never hear our children say, "Dad, I sort of desire ——. " Instead, they say, "Dad, I need ——. " When your children define something as a "need," they think they are entitled to it, that they have the right to demand it, and that if you love them, you will deliver it.

Parents, it is very important for you to come to grips with the fact that your children will come into the world with a distorted sense of personal need. They will repeatedly turn personal wants and luxuries into "needs," and when they do, they will feel entitled to these things and judge your love by your willingness to provide this thing that they mistakenly think they need. They'll do the same with God.

But something even more significant will happen. Your children will attach their happiness, that is, their inner sense of peace and rest, to the things that they have told themselves they need. They will look to these things to provide them with their identity. They will make it their life purpose to acquire and experience these things. This means that without it ever being a conscious decision, they will look horizontally for things that can only be obtained vertically. They will look to the creation to find things

Forever and Parenting

that they were hardwired to get from the Creator. Forever can set them straight.

Destiny reminds us that we are not at the center, and that we are not in control. Our children need to know that the greatest danger in all of life is not to be found outside but inside them. The thing that they need most in life is to be rescued from themselves! Your children need to know that they will never find deep and lasting happiness and rest in chasing some personal definition of need. They need to understand that their hearts' desires will be fulfilled when they find their fulfillment in God.

Your children's deepest need is their need for God; their most dangerous delusion is that they can find life somewhere apart from him. Helping your children daily to "see" God is central to your task as a parent. If you pay attention, you will see your children attaching their inner well-being to something other than God. This provides you the opportunity to not only warn them about the inability of that thing to satisfy the longing of their hearts, but also to point them to God, who can give them the satisfaction of heart they seek.

Our son Justin had just lost his mind. At fifteen, his desires, thoughts, motivations, hopes, and dreams had been captured by a girl. He was looking to her to give him a reason to get up in the morning, to feel good about life, and to have hope for the future—all things no flawed person can give to another person. He would ride the roller coaster of her responses to him. He quit caring about his schoolwork. He quit wanting to be with his other friends. She had become his own personal messiah.

When this kind of thing happens with one of our kids, we have a choice to make as a parent. We can view this as a massive hassle and interruption that we have to deal with, or we can welcome it as a God-given opportunity to help the child see what is going on inside and point him or her to God. We can yell at our child, telling him that he is trashing his life and that he can never see the object of his infatuation again. Or we can begin a conversation

Forever

with him that helps him understand the danger of seeking from a person or thing what he was hardwired to get from God.

Luella and I began that conversation with Justin. Yes, we told him that he couldn't see this girl for a while, but that's not all we did. We talked and talked. We helped him to see the evidence in his life of what was happening in his heart. When you intervene in this manner, you are giving rescuing grace an opportunity to operate in the heart of your child. Justin began to see the danger in what he was doing, and he is now thankful that we worked in the moment to rescue him from himself.

The God of forever loves our children more than we ever could. In love he will put their struggles in our faces so that we will work to rescue them from danger and point them to him. He won't always do this when it is comfortable for us, but at the moment he knows is best. And in those moments, we will either respond to our children out of hearts that are irritated or hearts that are thankful.

Since God purposefully designed the created world so that everything he made is a visible finger pointing to his glory, it is natural to talk about his existence all the time. It would be positively unnatural not to! For instance, how can you fry an egg without seeing the glory of God? How can you experience a powerful storm without reflecting on God's power? How can you see a mountain, a flower, or a wild animal without thinking about God's creative majesty? Left on their own, children have a perverse ability to look at the physical world around them and not see God. So they need their parents to point them to what is designed to be obvious. The problem is, you cannot point them to what you, too, fail to see.

FOREVER REMINDS YOU THAT THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES

Our culture doesn't like consequences. We live in a "Whatever," "It's all good," "Do your thing," "Pay your money; take your

Forever and Parenting

choice" society. We like to think that life is an open game that we play as we want and that there aren't any winners or losers. We like to think we can follow our own path and write our own rules. We like to think that we can do what we want today and somehow avoid tomorrow's consequences. But there is no such thing as planting that doesn't produce some kind of harvest. The same is true when it comes to parenting.

Forever looms before your children to remind them that every thought, word, action, desire, choice, and decision carries with it consequences not only in this life, but in the one to come. Paul says, "God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Galatians 6:7). Things won't always be as they are now. This world is in motion, directed by the unstoppable finger of God toward a final conclusion. A hereafter of reaping will follow the life your children are now living. Forever reminds us that life moves forward; it doesn't go around in circles.

Think of it this way: You have given birth to philosophers, theologians, and archaeologists. Your children may think poorly or improperly, but they never stop thinking. They have a restless desire to figure out what is. They want life to make sense. So they are in a constant conversation with themselves, interpreting their experiences and hoping to make sense out of them. Your children are archaeologists who will dig through the mound of their existence seeking to understand their own history. So to impart to them a theology of consequences is very important.

A theology of consequences is not the same as an abstract appreciation of some impersonal law of cause and effect. The existence of eternity forces you to the conclusion that the world in which your children live is a world under careful and constant rule. The God who created and rules all that is, is working his plot. The will of God will be done. He has not only created life as your children know it, but has also designed how it is to be lived. Since they were created for him, designed to live with him in view, and hardwired in the beginning to live with him forever, consequences

must be thought of vertically and relationally. Disobedience is not first about the breaking of some abstract rule; it is about breaking relationship with God. When your children ignore God, they find it easy to disobey his commands. Consequences have to do with the authority of God and the ultimate question of whether your kids have lived in submission to his will in the particular relationships and situations that make up their lives. Imparting to your children a *harvest mentality* is a very important piece of what it means to function as God's agent in their lives. So we need to talk to our children repeatedly about the loving heavenly Father who graces us with his wisdom and sets up for us boundaries of protection, which don't rob us of life, but offer us life as it was designed to be enjoyed.

FOREVER CALLS YOU TO PROCESS PARENTING

Children have a shortsighted approach to life and live for the moment. They are ruled by this moment's thought, this moment's desire, this moment's emotion, this moment's dream, or this moment's crisis. They don't take the long view of things, let alone look at life from the perspective of eternity. So it is important that their parents introduce them to *long living*. To do this, you must remember what viewing life from the vantage point of eternity tells you about life in the here and now.

Forever calls you to think of life as a carefully administered process overseen by a God who is wise, loving, and good. He calls us to follow him, making his process of preparation (change and growth) our personal agenda. In this way, every event in our life has meaning and purpose, but no event is ultimate. Each situation is an occasion of and an opportunity for growth.

So how do you keep God's process in view as a parent? First, you tell yourself that whenever your eyes see or your ears hear of the sins, weaknesses, or failures of your children, you are never to see them as interruptions or hassles. These moments must always

be viewed as times to show grace. God loves our children. He has put them in a family of faith, and he is giving us opportunities to be part of his loving process of rescue, change, and growth.

Second, you must be willing to lovingly repeat yourself over and over again. Since change is almost always a process, we can't expect to have one encounter with one of our children that will forever change that child. Rather, we need to be committed to many mini moments of change.

Third, we are not called just to announce failure and enforce consequences, but to be God's instruments of heart change in our children. So, in moments of correction, we must always be asking, "What does God want my child to see that she is not now seeing, and how can I help my child see it?" To commit to change in our children, we need to see where change is needed. You see, our children cannot grieve what they do not see, and they cannot confess what they do not grieve, and they cannot desire to change what they have not confessed. Process parenting means finding joy in doing these things again and again.

As parents we have to know where we are going with our children. We always have to have the goals of heart change and life change before our eyes. We have to resist being emotionally reactive and see each new moment of instruction, correction, encouragement, or discipline as a God-given opportunity to take one more step toward our goal. And we can't try to accomplish in one moment what will only happen by means of a process. We must wake up every morning with a process mentality, thankful and expectant, knowing that we will again have opportunities to gain ground toward our goals.

As you take the long view of things, resisting treating this moment as isolated or ultimate, you teach your children to do the same, having conversation after conversation that requires them to think of their lives in vastly bigger terms than the needs, feelings, and wants of the moment.

Many parents fall into the habit of talking *at* their children instead of talking *with* them. To talk with them, you have to be

willing to forsake the spontaneous lectures so tempting to every parent and commit yourself to asking and listening. Our goal is not only to have a conversation, but to have one that stimulates accuracy of self-view and a hunger for God's help. I have found a series of five questions to be very helpful in stimulating this kind of conversation.

1. *What was going on?* Here you are getting your child to give you a summary of what happened in the situation you are about to discuss.
2. *What were you thinking and feeling as it was happening?* This helps your child to think about how his heart was interacting with whatever was going on.
3. *What did you do in response?* With this question you are helping your child to see that his behavior was not shaped by the situation, but by how his heart interacted with it.
4. *Why did you do it; what were you trying to accomplish?* Here you are helping the child to examine his motives. He did what he did because he was after something.
5. *What was the result?* This question enables your child to see the connection between his desires, behavior, and the consequences he is now dealing with.

Remember, the purpose of these questions is not to indict a child for some wrong, but to help him see things about himself that he wouldn't otherwise see and to reach out for the help that only God can give.

REST IN GRACE

The more we view life from the perspective of forever, the more grace-oriented we will be as parents, because the forever story of Scripture is a grace story.

In the long process of parenting, we won't always have everything figured out. We won't always feel capable, knowledgeable,

and wise. We won't always feel loving toward our children. We won't always feel strong and prepared. We won't always say and do the best thing. We will have days when parenting seems burdensome and discouraging, and we will have moments when we feel like quitting. We will have times when we feel that we're constantly playing catch up—just when we think we understand our children, they will move on to another stage in their development.

As parents, we will never be able to rest in our knowledge, character, or skill. If anything, being a parent will expose our weaknesses in a way that few things expose them. That is why real rest is found only in a deep-seated belief in the resources of grace that are yours in the daily presence of a Redeemer who has come into your life and is working his eternal plan.

Saying that you get the values, motivations, and encouragements you need to be a wise and faithful parent only when you view this important task from the vantage point of eternity is not an overstatement. From this perspective we will be reminded of how important our task is and how blessed we are to be the recipients of an eternal grace that meets us in our weakness and takes us where only grace could enable us to go. And we can get up every morning, not knowing what we will face, but assured that forgiving, empowering, delivering grace will be with us until forever is our final address.

I will close this chapter by telling you how that grace once met and changed me. What seemed like just another weekend in the life of a parent of a teenager proved to be so much more. Our son had asked us if he could spend the weekend with a friend. We knew the family and were glad to say yes. What we didn't know was that he was not spending the weekend with his friend. He had asked his friend to cover for him so he could go somewhere he knew we would not allow.

On Saturday afternoon I got a call from the friend's mother, informing me that our son was not at her home. Her son had begun to feel guilty and had confessed to his mom, and she had made the difficult phone call to us. I got off the phone and was livid. I couldn't

Forever

believe that our son would look me in the face and lie to me. In anger I stormed upstairs and blurted out to my wife, "Guess where our son is this weekend?" and I told her the story of his deception. Luella could feel my anger, and she said, "I think you need to pray." I said, "I don't think I can pray for him right now." She said, "I didn't mean for you to pray for him; I think you need to pray for you."

I went to my bedroom to pray for God's help, and it hit me that, because of his love, God had already begun a work of rescue in my son's life. God was the one who pressed in on the conscience of my son's friend, causing him to confess to his mom. God was the one who gave her the courage to make that difficult call to me. (I was her pastor.) And God was the one who now was giving me time to get ahold of myself before my son came home. Now, rather than wanting to rip into my son, I wanted to be part of what this God of grace was doing in this moment of rebellion, deception, hurt, and disappointment.

When my son got home on Sunday afternoon, I didn't pounce on him at the door. I let him relax for a couple hours and then went down to his room. I knocked on the door and asked him if we could talk.

"Sure," he said, so I asked him to turn down his stereo.

"Do you ever think about how much God loves you?"

He looked at me a bit confused and said, "Sometimes."

"Do you ever think about how much God's grace operates in your life every day?"

He looked up at me but didn't speak.

"Do you know how much God's grace was working in your life even this weekend?"

He looked up at me with concern on his face and said, "Who told you?"

"You have lived your life in the light. You've made good choices. You've been an easy son to parent, but this weekend you took a step toward the darkness. You can live in the darkness if you want. You can learn to lie and deceive. You can use your friends as your cover.

Forever and Parenting

You can develop the skill of creating a good backstory. You can step over God's boundaries. Or you can determine to live in God's light. I'm pleading with you: don't live in the darkness; live in the light." Then I said, "That's all I want to say to you right now. I love you."

As I turned to walk away, I heard his voice from behind me saying, "Dad, don't go." And as I turned around, with tears in his eyes, he said, "Dad, I want to live in the light, but it is so hard. Will you help me?"

And we began a much lengthier conversation.

If God in grace hadn't caused me to discover my son's deception in time to get my heart where it needed to be, that moment of transforming grace between my son and me would not have happened. I would have found out later, gotten in his face, ripped him apart with words, and walked away. I would have called it Christian parenting, but it would have been neither Christian nor parenting. It would have been an explosion of self-righteous parental anger that would have left the heart of my son utterly unchanged.

You see, eternity doesn't just offer you the future grace of a forever free from the trials you daily face raising flawed children in a fallen world. Eternity offers you the promise of present grace. That grace comes in the faithful presence and provisions of your Redeemer. It's the gift of grace upon grace upon grace until forever is your final home. This grace gives you everything you need so that you can be an instrument of heart- and life-changing grace to your children. You don't have to try to do by the force of your anger, by the threat of a harsh punishment, or by the power of your words what only grace can do. If you and I had the power to change our children, God's grace wouldn't be necessary.

Parent, if you are God's child, forever is not just your future; it is your guarantee of grace in the here and now. That grace meets you in your toughest moments and works to change you so that you can be God's tool of change in the hearts of your children. And that grace is with you and will not wear out before eternity is your reality.