

# *The* Good Dad

BECOMING *the* FATHER YOU  
WERE MEANT TO BE

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ZONDERVAN

*The Good Dad*

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## One

# Moments

IT WAS DAD'S NIGHT IN YUCCA VALLEY.

It came like clockwork every year to that hot, dusty California town. The Yucca Valley football team would line the field before a game, each player separated by two or three yards of grass. I was a sophomore, and this was my first Dad's Night. We faced the home stands, bleachers full of moms and dads and brothers and sisters. The bright lights of the stadium made us squint.

Normally, I relished standing under those lights. I had always felt pretty comfortable on that field, one of the few places where I ever felt truly at home. But in that moment, on Dad's Night, they felt too bright. I felt exposed, embarrassed. I knew what was coming. Right then, in that moment, I wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else. I wanted time to jump ahead ten minutes so I could strap on my helmet, grab the football, and do what I knew how to do.

One by one, the announcer called out the name of a father. The dad would run into the lights and onto the field, jogging through the grass to stand by his son — a small celebration,

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a way to acknowledge the dads who had helped their kids throw a football or taught them how to tackle or made sure they didn't miss practices. Not everyone had a dad there, of course. But back in 1976, we had a lot more intact families than we do today. And those who didn't have a father around typically invited someone else to stand in his place — a brother or grandfather or friend.

But that night, I didn't have anyone. I had forgotten to get someone to play my "Dad," just for that one night.

"Jim Daly," the announcer said over the loudspeaker, and then a pause. "Jim Daly's father is not present tonight." Boom, that was it. Down the row it went. I watched as other fathers ran onto the field to hug or shake hands with their sons. And there I stood, alone again.

Want to know how important fathers are? Ask the guy who didn't have one.

## Vanishing Dads

When it comes right down to it, life is a series of moments — bite-size chunks of time that help define us and shape our view of the world around us. Sometimes you know what they look like *in* the moment. Sometimes you barely notice them until weeks or months or years later. But then one day, you'll look back on them and realize how important they were. And maybe you'll say, like I sometimes do, "That was something special. Something critical. That was a *moment*."

We all have moments connected with our fathers, stories that not only helped illustrate what kind of men our own dads were, but maybe point to what they should've been. And like it or not, those moments shape how we think about fatherhood itself. Sometimes they can set the bar for us, show us what it

means to be a dad. Sometimes they can serve as cautionary tales — *Man, I never want to act that way, the way my old man did after a few too many beers*. Or maybe, like my Dad's Night moment, they set themselves apart by their very absence, for the vacuum they left behind.

Every year I struggled with trying to figure out what to do for Dad's Night. Every year, I thought, *Crap, who can I bring?* Every year, I had to scrounge up a substitute "Dad" to fill in for the real fathers who failed me. My biological father essentially drank himself to death. My stepfather left the day we buried my mother, literally taking a taxi out of my family's life with barely a good-bye. And my foster father . . . well, for now, let's just call him a little odd. And every one of them had left my life by the time I turned twelve.

You'll hear more about those men in due time. But for now, you just need to know that I had to deal with the awkwardness I so keenly felt that Dad's Night in one way or another almost every day while growing up. I always felt an empty space on the field.

I know I'm nothing special. My experience has become almost the norm.

According to recent United States Census figures, fifteen million kids live apart from their biological fathers. That's one out of every three American children.<sup>1</sup> When we look at the rate of fatherlessness among African-Americans, that rate soars to two out of every three.<sup>2</sup> Some people call it an epidemic. Back in 1976, I might've had three teammates who didn't have dads there on Dad's Night. I doubt Yucca Valley High School still honors fathers every season anymore, but if it did? That number would probably hover closer to twenty-five or thirty.

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But while growing up without a father has become far more common today, that doesn't make it any easier.

Instinctively, we know this. In a recent poll by the National Center for Fathering, 92 percent of respondents said that dads make a “unique contribution” to the lives of their children, and seven out of ten see absentee dads as the biggest family or social problem facing the United States.<sup>3</sup> Research backs up such a belief. About 44 percent of children in mother-only households live in poverty, according to a 2011 U.S. Census study, compared to 12 percent of children living in intact homes.<sup>4</sup> These kids will more likely have trouble with alcohol or drugs, says the National Fatherhood Initiative. They're more likely to cause trouble in school or have run-ins with the law. And after their high school-playing days end, these boys without fathers have (according to a Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report) a higher likelihood of landing in jail.<sup>5</sup>

The stats for girls are no better. They, too, struggle as kids and into adulthood. Moreover, females raised without fathers are four times more likely to engage in sexual intercourse at an early age, and more than twice as likely to get pregnant early.<sup>6</sup>

If you look at virtually any measure of the mental and emotional health of children and how they make the transition into adulthood, kids with involved dads simply do better.

I find it ironic that my teammates so long ago didn't always appreciate those fathers running out onto the field. In the locker room after practice, I'd listen to them complain about their dads — the rules, the curfews, the fights. They'd say, “My dad's a pain in the [you know what].” And as I'd listen, I'd think, *If you only knew.*

At the time, I lived with my brother, Dave, a guy barely old enough to buy beer. While he certainly was a good brother and gave me some much-needed stability, I didn't see him as

a father figure. He set few boundaries, established few rules — a situation some of my friends would've loved. Curfew? Of course not.

On fall Friday nights as I walked out the door for my football game, I'd ask, "What time do you want me to come home?"

"Oh, two, three in the morning should be fine," he'd say.

"Well, okay," I remember saying. "I'll *try* to stay out that late."

I never felt jealous of my teammates — at least that I remember. But I did feel a sense of loss in talking with the other kids who had a father, even if they had a strained relationship. I remember the yearning: *If you only knew what I'd do to have a dad to be there to talk with or to set a curfew. If you only knew how much I want a dad to have a rough time with. If you only knew.*

Jeff Shook, my teammate and close friend, gave me the only real window into what a "normal" family looked like. He'd sometimes invite me over for a pregame meal. Mrs. Shook would cook us some steaks and baked potatoes, all the protein and carbohydrates you need before a game. On some pregame days, Mr. Shook would show up too, and we'd spend the meal just talking and laughing. And I could see a glimmer of what I'd been missing.

When Jeff and I got back in touch years later, he learned something about my backstory, something I had kept pretty private until recently.

"I had no idea all that stuff was going on in your life," he told me. "If I would've known, I think our family would've done more to help you." But I didn't want that. I didn't want to be a project. I just wanted to go over and have a meal with Jeff. I never said, *Man, I wish I had a mom and dad like you.* I never went there. I never opened that door.

The dads in my life didn't teach me much, but I learned



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a few things from them anyway. I developed mechanisms to cope — the ability to laugh at myself and at life's ups and downs. The ability to move on after disappointment. And I certainly learned that I couldn't rely on anyone else for much of anything. No father would hug me after the game and tell me I played well, win or lose. No dad would tell me he felt proud of me. *Ah, who needs a dad anyway?* I'd tell myself.

But then, in moments like Dad's Night, I knew how great it would feel to have a father with me, to stand beside me, on that grassy field.

On nights like those, it felt like someone tossed another rock for me to lug around in my backpack. And then I'd just shrug and keep on going.

### Praise, Laments, and Complications

When I was five, my father came home drunk and threatened to kill my mom, and I didn't see him again for years. When I was seven, another man, Hank, came into my life and became my stepfather a year later. But when I was nine, my mother died, and Hank left too, deserting me and my brothers and sisters. I went to live with a foster family named the Reils after that, but that situation only lasted a year, and things went sour well before then. My father and I gave it another shot when I was eleven, but that also failed because of his drinking. After that, I stopped trying to find a good dad. It didn't seem like one was in the cards for me.

Some people find it ironic that a guy who had such a dysfunctional childhood would go on to become president of Focus on the Family. But as I look back on it, I think my brokenness as a child gave me the passion to help others build their own strong families. I wanted to come alongside people

and help them avoid what I experienced. I didn't connect the dots the moment I signed up with Focus. I didn't consciously say to myself, *Let's save people the pain and heartache I suffered*. But I knew the importance of family. And why? Because I never had a great family of my own as a child, and I knew I had missed out on some pretty important stuff. I know the critical importance of fathers, because I know how important they could've been to me if only they'd shown up.

And our constituents constantly reconfirm for me the importance of fathers. I hear their stories — their *moments* — almost every day.

Not long ago, I wrote a blog post titled “Should Father’s Day Be Outlawed?” in which I reflected on a push by some to eliminate the holiday. Readers, not too surprisingly perhaps, said we should keep the holiday. They'd bring up the shared times fishing or tinkering on the family car. They'd mention little nuggets of wisdom their dads passed on to them. They'd write about how much they learned from their fathers as they went about their daily business, working and praying and living.

Consider these thoughts from David:

*In the eighth grade I played on what I'd generously call a not very good school football team. I was not a star. I played center. We played a team in a really not very nice neighborhood and it was pouring rain and the field was not good — not much grass and mostly mud. And my dad was there before the game to see me warm up and was there when it was over, standing in his suit with an umbrella, cheering us all the way. We lost the football game, but my dad showed me I was a winner in his book.*

Breana wrote:

*He read to me, he played with me, he taught me about*

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*nature and life and how to ride a bike. He's the one who taught me to drive on the freeway, the one who showed me how to use a rifle and then took me hunting. He's the one who listens to my ideas and dreams, spends hours researching how to make them happen, creates a flowchart and checklist, and helps me to turn them into realities . . . He waits up for me during my late night babysitting jobs, even if he got up at 4:30 and drove halfway across the state that day.*

From Brian:

*What I remember most about my dad is that when I was a kid, he always had oil-stained hands . . . That might not seem terribly significant to a lot of people, and it might not be fashionable to have grease under your fingernails, but that is the way my dad approaches life. He often works long after his hands are dirty or bloody or bruised from whatever task he has undertaken. He was hands-on and involved in what is important to his children and his grandchildren. When we played baseball or soccer, he coached. When I was in Boy Scouts, he was a leader. In church youth group, he chaperoned. When my brother worked on cars, he was under the hood. When we rode motorcycles, he tuned them up. When I became a police officer, he listened to my stories. When I received awards, he came to watch. When I graduated from law school, he celebrated with me. When our children were born, he was the first one we called and he is the one we trust to love and encourage them as their "Pop-Pop." In those times, the hands of my dad have held me when I cried, picked me up when I fell, patted my back when I did right, spanked my bottom when I did wrong, applauded my accomplishments when I succeeded at anything worth doing. Just recently, I felt the most incredible peace when I found out my dad's hands prayed for me as well.*

Think dads don't make a difference? The more than three hundred comments sparked by this blog beg to differ. They can make a huge difference and change a child's life for the better. Over and over, respondents used words like *hero* and *role model* to describe their dads. Some called their fathers the most precious, most influential people in their lives.

But other readers used different words to describe their dads — *demanding, legalistic, busy, abusive*. Some reminded me of my own sad experiences. They talked of fathers who left them when they were very young. Or fathers who drank too much. Or fathers who kicked them out of the house when they were sixteen. They lamented their fathers' poor choices and acknowledged broken relationships. Some say that on Father's Day they send cards to their uncles or grandfathers or mothers — the people who served them as better fathers than their real dads ever did.

And people would often express the inherent complexity, the messiness, that's part of being a family. *My father wasn't perfect, but ...* they'd begin. Or, *My dad didn't have much time for us, but ...* Or, *My father made some bad choices when I was younger, but ...*

People wrote about how their dads did really well in one area but faltered in another. They'd talk about how their fathers didn't really know how to be fathers until something happened in their lives to change them, often a moment that involved Christ's influence on them. Sometimes readers admitted that they rebelled as teens and their relationship soured, only to get redeemed later in life.

And that brings up an important point that we'll hammer over and over as we talk about what it means to be a father, and what it takes to be a good one. Yes, fathers are incredibly important. Yes, what fathers do impact their kids mightily, for

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good or for ill. But *all* of us will fail sometimes. *All* of us will fall short. I know I do. My own two boys, Trent and Troy, know as well as anyone how I sometimes fall short — and I'm president of Focus on the Family! I'm *writing a book* about fatherhood. We need to cut ourselves some slack. We can't grow so intimidated by the job that we kick ourselves for every minor misstep or freeze up and stop trying altogether.

I also believe that even if you had a less than ideal upbringing, as I did, you can overcome it. You don't need to feel burdened with the sins of your father — not if you learn from his failures and commit to overcoming them.

Not having a reliable father affected me mightily. I think I would've been healthier with one. I would've had a greater sense of confidence. I would've had a place to go where I could talk through my concerns and issues. Just having conversations with a dad might've helped me make better decisions, particularly in high school. A dad might've helped me make choices I knew in my heart were right but just needed some reinforcement to actually make them.

But in a way, I think I'm a better father because of what I went through — not a perfect father, but a better father because of what I *didn't* get. I know the ache in my heart of not having a dad in the moment I needed him. So with my boys, I want to deliver that, to give them what I didn't have. I still fall short. I'm not perfect. But I know they get a good part of me.

There's hope. You don't have to remain tied to your father's legacy if you had a poor one. You don't have to stay anchored to his shortcomings. You can become something better. We can get better at this fatherhood thing. Our kids aren't asking for perfection. They're asking for our *presence* — to show up for the job each and every day. They're asking us to be there for them, to guide them, to hug them, and sometimes to just

stand on the sidelines — ready to run onto the field when our name gets called.

And when you're present, truly *with them* as they grow up, you find the opportunity to create bonds with your kids that will stick with them — and you — for a lifetime. That boy will always remember that summer when Dad taught him to cast a lure. That girl will always remember those afternoons when Dad played catch with her. Those things *stick*. They're moments. And lives worth living are made up of those moments.

### Rocking into Fatherhood

In late 1999, my wife, Jean, and I had been trying to get pregnant for a while.

Simple task, right? Well, at the time it seemed easier said than done, given the fact that I served as vice president for Focus on the Family's international division, traveling all over the world. I remember the week of conception. I'd just returned from a trip to Asia and had two weeks at home over Thanksgiving before I had to leave again. During those two weeks, we struck gold, obviously; but when Jean told me the news that she was pregnant, the hectic time made it feel almost matter-of-fact. Almost like we'd completed a task on our to-do list. *Boom, we can check that off. Success! Fertilization has occurred.* I didn't feel much like a father yet. Everything felt abstract, theoretical.

Fast-forward nine months. All the abstraction has vanished. Things have become *real* in a big way. Jean's been in labor for twenty-seven hours and feels utterly exhausted. The baby's vitals don't look good. The doctors prepare to do a C-section, but they give her one last chance to push. And God

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bless her, on that last push — maybe because she really wants to avoid that C-section — she gets it done. Trent comes into this world around 4:30 p.m. on August 12, 2000. They clean him up and bring him back to us, all swaddled and shiny. The nurses want him to stay in the birthing room, but Jean is just wiped out and ready to sleep.

So at about 8:00 p.m., I take Trent — tiny, helpless baby — and together we sit in the rocking chair. And there we spend the night, all night, in the rocking chair.

It feels incredible, that time with Trent, holding that precious little life literally in my hands. *Oh man, I'm a dad*, I think. *I'm really a dad*. And in that moment, all the joys and duties and responsibilities of fatherhood hit me for the first time. I rock him through the night, the chair gliding back and forth almost silently as Jean sleeps beside us. And as I rock, I talk. I pray. “I hope I can be a good father to you,” I say. “I hope I can be a better father, the father I never had.”

I didn't sleep that night. If I did doze off, I did so for just a second or two. I couldn't get over having this tiny being in my arms. I didn't *want* to fall asleep. Didn't want to accidentally drop him or let him slip from my arms. I wanted to hold him, to protect him, to keep him close all through the night.

What a beautiful night! For me, it amounted to a metamorphosis into fatherhood — physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually.

Call it a moment.

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**TO THINK ABOUT**

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1. What sorts of moments do you remember about your dad? What are the positive ones? What are the negative ones?
2. Did your dad do some things — teach you some skills, pass on some lessons, have fun with you — that you have replicated, or you'd like to replicate, with your own children?
3. Are there aspects of your dad that you do your best to avoid?
4. What sorts of moments are you making for your own children?
5. Is there a moment you remember when you truly understood what being a father meant?





## Two

# The Look of a Father

“I CAN’T DEAL WITH THIS. I’M MOVING BACK TO SAN FRANCISCO.”

With those words, my stepfather, Hank, greeted us after my siblings and I returned home from our mom’s funeral — a funeral he didn’t attend. They were the last words I ever heard him say.

While Mike, Dave, Kim, Dee Dee, and I said our mortal farewells to Mom, Hank had started packing. By the time we returned from the funeral, our house had been almost completely emptied — no TV; no green couch; no pictures on the wall. Our clothes had been dumped from dressers and left in piles around the house. A few of our personal belongings dotted the floor — some toys of mine in a box, perhaps a snapshot or two. Anything of real value, anything Hank considered valuable, had disappeared, either sold or shipped off. And now he was leaving too. He carried a pair of suitcases to the curb in the twilight. A taxicab was waiting. And just like that, he fled. I never saw him again.

He didn’t bother to wave good-bye. He never even turned around.

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*I can't deal with this.* Funny, since Hank looked like he could deal with anything. He resembled Liam Neeson — a big, handsome guy with a chiseled nose and blondish hair. He was probably around fifty, I'd guess. Navy guy. A sailor. We called him "Hank the Tank," and he could be pretty brutal. Not physically (not to me, anyway), but he intimidated us and got angry pretty easily. He'd never married before, never had children. And although he could scare the stuffing out of us "children" (Mike was grown, and Dave nearly so), he actually *didn't* know how to "deal with" us. You could tell he didn't love the kids at all. He considered the five of us just excess baggage, the kids he had to put up with to be with my mom.

But his passion, at least for my mom, ran deep.

They started dating when I was seven and got married a year later. He knew that all my brothers and sisters, much older than me, would leave the house in a few years. Hank probably figured he could wait. After all, he and my mom would have the rest of their lives to spend with each other.

And then my mom got sick. I had no context for how bad it was, and no one really told me. Hank never did. But he isolated her from us. She slept in the back bedroom, and Hank would literally lock the door to keep us away from her. Maybe he was worried we'd tire her or make her anxious about us. I'd go weeks without seeing her.

One day when I came home from school, I saw the door open a crack, something that hardly ever happened. I knew I'd make Hank angry if I went in, but when I walked over to the door, she called me.

"I'm glad it's you," my mom said, and she invited me in.

The sight of her took my breath away. She was so skinny, so frail. Her hair, normally reddish-brown and shoulder length, had been cut incredibly short. I had never seen her like that.

But she still smiled like my mother. She asked if I could do a favor for her — go to the store, buy some chrysanthemum seeds, and plant them under her window.

I didn't know then that I wasn't really doing *her* the favor, but she was doing *me* one. She knew those beautiful flowers would remind me of her.

With my mom so sick, Hank got forced into the role of a single father. And he didn't know what to do, even if he *wanted* to do it. He filled our house with rules and regulations and lots of discipline, but no love that I ever felt. If I left a coat lying on the sofa, he'd force me to hang it up fifty or a hundred times. But he never hugged us, never asked us how we felt. And while he'd at least take the time to yell at my more rebellious brothers and sisters, he didn't pay much attention to me at all.

He did perform one duty that should've made us feel more like a family. Most nights, he made us dinner. And though he never prayed before my mom got sick, he'd pray now. We'd huddle around the dinner table and hold hands.

"Dear Lord," he'd say. And sometimes that would be as far as he'd get before he'd begin to convulse and shake with gut-wrenching, silent sobs.

Keep in mind that I didn't know what was going on with my mother or why Hank suddenly got religion. I didn't know how sick she was. I certainly had no idea she was *dying*. Hank didn't talk to any of us about her. And so when Hank started shaking over a dinner blessing, part of me thought, *This guy's a wacko*. None of us kids knew exactly what to make of it. I'm ashamed to say it, but when we saw him shake at the table, we'd giggle. We all thought the same thing: *This loser of a stepdad is losing his mind*.

Looking back, I see the bigger picture. Hank probably knew my mom didn't have much time left. And sitting there at the

table, praying to a God he barely understood, surrounded by kids and responsibilities he barely knew, all of his worry, frustration, and sorrow just poured out of him. *What am I going to do?* Even then, he probably thought, *I can't handle this.*

### Flustered Fathers

"I can't deal with this," Hank had said. I wonder how many guys have thought the same thing when they heard their girlfriend was pregnant. Or as they check out of the hospital with a new baby. A long night filled with colicky cries. After another call from the principal's office. Or at 2:00 a.m., when their teenage daughter is *still* not home.

*I can't deal with this.*

"It is much easier to become a father than to be one," wrote author Kent Nerburn, and every dad knows he speaks the truth.<sup>7</sup> Hank the Tank never wanted to be a father. But even for men who'd *like* to do the job, it can feel pretty intimidating. We can master what we do for a living or dominate on the basketball court. But so much of what we experience as fathers, we can't control. When our six-month-old baby starts wailing, we can't *make* him stop. When our son is failing algebra, we can't *make* him pass. When our daughter gets bullied, we can't just magically *make* everything all better. Fatherhood doesn't much resemble being a mechanic: We can't fix things with a turn of a socket wrench. It's much slower work. Subtle work. Sometimes we don't know if what we're doing is even working. For men, that can feel very frustrating.

And then there's the added difficulty of trying to figure out what it means to be a father today, because the role has changed significantly. According to a Pew Research Study, 63

percent of dads say it's more difficult to raise children today than it was even a generation ago.<sup>8</sup> Things have changed so much that many men don't even know the job requirements.

Fatherhood indeed looked a lot different a century or so ago. When agriculture dominated our society, most men worked from dawn till dusk in the fields. Their jobs were to provide and protect. Up to a certain age, childrearing remained mostly Mom's work, and the children's chores often kept them near hearth and home — sweeping floors, washing dishes, feeding the chickens, and the like.

But as the child grew, he or she often gradually moved outside the safer confines of home and into the wider world of Dad. He'd teach them how to hunt and fish. He'd train them how to use a hammer and saw so they could help patch fences or build new outbuildings. Although this pattern especially held true for boys, girls also worked alongside their dads. And on family farms and in rural areas across the country, that still remains true today. A friend of mine who grew up on a farm knew how to do pretty much everything that needed doing by the time he celebrated his fourteenth birthday — plowing fields, milking cows, running the farm equipment, even helping to birth calves. It was hard work, and sometimes each chore could take hours of sweaty labor. That gave kids a lot of time to think. A lot of time to talk. And that's when Dad would really come into his own as a father. As he and his children worked shoulder to shoulder, he'd talk with them about keeping their word, keeping their bonds — all the values that meant something in that environment.

Those values got transferred from one generation to the next very organically, very naturally, almost as a by-product — or maybe, more fairly, an extension — of the father's two

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primary duties: providing for the family (with food, money, and a few lifelong lessons) and protecting the family (from poverty or outside dangers or even in-family delinquency). The dad was the family's strong man and traditionally its ultimate authority. While women were just as important to the family's well-being (and sometimes worked in the field just as hard as the men), their traditional duties centered on nurturing. Caregiving. Keeping everything running smoothly.

Now fast-forward to the twenty-first century and take a look at the typical "traditional" family. Not many of us live on a farm. More often than not, both parents work outside the home. The problems and dangers we face are often more subtle, more insidious, than a flash flood or a bear outside the door. And while we still have a huge need for a nurturing, caregiving force inside the home — the traditional role of a mother — a father's traditional duties have undergone a huge transformation. His duties as a provider have been split between parents. His duties as a protector have grown less obvious. Kids don't have to work alongside Dad when they reach a certain age, robbing Dad of valuable lesson and bonding time.

More mothers than ever have embarked on solid, lucrative careers. Women now make up almost half of the labor force (47 percent in 2010, according to statistics from the United States Department of Labor).<sup>9</sup> A report by the Council of Graduate Schools found that women outnumber men in graduate degree work, 58 to 42 percent.<sup>10</sup> And a study by Pew Research found that women spend twice as much time working for pay as they did in 1965, while, conversely, men spend twice as many hours doing household chores and watching the kids.<sup>11</sup>

None of these statistics are, in themselves, good or bad. But they do illustrate the radical time of transition that fathers find themselves in right now.

On the one hand, I think fathers face a higher and greater expectation to be more engaged with their children. With more moms pitching in as “providers,” we expect dads to be better nurturers and caregivers. We change diapers and cook breakfast and kiss boo-boos. And that’s great — fantastic, in fact. But guys don’t always feel at home in those areas.

On the other hand, our culture often sees dads as next to irrelevant. We’re sperm donors, and that’s it. According to the National Fatherhood Initiative, 31 percent of children who live without their fathers haven’t seen their dads at all in the last three months.<sup>12</sup> And even fathers who stick around get told they provide comic relief more than anything. Flip on the television during prime time and you’ll almost certainly see a few clueless, buffoonish dads dragging their knuckles across the screen. It doesn’t matter if you watch a sitcom or a pizza commercial — while mothers usually appear as the wise, practical, thinking parent, fathers blunder in just as oversized kids.

On the one hand, we dads hear we have to do *everything*, and do it perfectly. On the other hand, we’re good for *nothing*. No wonder we feel confused. Our jobs have morphed from a family’s primary provider into something else not nearly as well-defined. We hear that we’ll probably fail at that anyway, and therefore many guys seem to say, “Why even try?”

Most of us can’t go back to the farm. And I believe that, as fathers, we should rejoice in the fact that we can take a greater role in raising our own kids. I see more engaged fathers as a great trend. But even great trends come with their share of obstacles. And I think some of the stuff that made us great fathers a century ago can explain why we sometimes struggle with what we’re supposed to be today.



## The Hero Gene

All men have what scientists call the SRY gene, responsible for growing the male testes. For a long time, science believed this gene had no other purpose — until some Australian scientists took a closer look in 2012 and discovered it also plays a part in how men react to stress. In stressful situations, the SRY gene triggers increased blood flow to a man's major organs and releases more of a chemical called catecholamine, both of which factor into our classic “fight or flight” response.<sup>13</sup>

Women, who lack the SRY gene, react much differently under stress. Their bodies generate internal opiates that help control pain, among other things. It may make females less prone to aggression but more apt to engage in what researchers call a “tend and befriend” response.

These scientists didn't use their findings to draw any conclusions on parental tendencies, but it's no big leap to make from the SRY gene to some of the trends we see in families today. Mothers tend to the kids while the fathers either take off, get abusive, or hide out in their man caves playing video games (a curious combination of fight *and* flight).

We need to tread lightly before we make sweeping generalizations about how men and women do or should behave. There are many, many exceptions. Even as we talk about deadbeat dads, we know many deadbeat moms exist too. Many men out there either overcame their SRY programming or channeled it in such a way as to become great caregivers. In 2013, the Pew Research Center declared that the number of single-father households has grown ninefold since 1960.<sup>14</sup>

But while fathers head about 24 percent of single-parent households,<sup>15</sup> single mothers still make up a sizable majority — and I think they always will. Parenthood tends to come

instinctually to women in ways that infrequently characterize men.

Women have become the bedrock of the modern-day family. They're predictable. Dependable. Nurturing. They have a desire to take care of things and people. When you see a woman who loves her family, you see something *normal*. Men are the wild cards. And the same gene that made us such effective protectors in days gone by may make us more prone to bail out.

Family life produces a lot of stress, but of a different sort than what we're wired to deal with. We're ready for action — to protect, to save. The SRY gene primes us to “fight” when danger looms. When disaster hits, most guys respond well. Fewer men shrink back from *that* moment. It's instinctive.

Back in my college days, some classmates and I took a trip to the Grand Canyon. We walked by this guy sitting at a picnic bench, pumping a kerosene lamp, and before we moved twenty feet past him, I heard an explosion. I turned around and saw the guy sprawled out on the ground, totally knocked out from the blast. His flaming kerosene lamp was spinning near the base of a tree *completely covered in dry leaves*. It looked like it might light up like a torch at any second. So, boom, I ripped off my jacket, ran over to the lamp, and in one swoop — *thwap!* — put out the fire. It was awesome. And for the next, oh, thirty seconds or so, the people around me seemed pretty impressed.

I think most guys would react like that. When we know what we need to do, most of us are pretty good about doing it. We want to protect. We want to save. We want to do something *big*. Why do you think superhero movies have become so popular? Why do you think our televisions air so many shows about catching the bad guys or saving lives or protecting our communities? Something in these shows appeals to a man's

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sense of justice. We want to band together, do good things, protect our communities and our families. We want to be the hero or be with a group of guys willing to be heroes.

But as a dad, you don't have many of those transcendent, hero-like moments: *Let's go mow the lawn! Let's go rake up the leaves! Let's have a tea party! Yeah! Awesome!* This is not the stuff of blockbuster movies or prime-time crime dramas. Maybe in days gone by, men could guard the old homestead from wolves or desperados, standing by the window with gun in hand. Now we protect our kids from bad Internet sites and trans-fats. We ask our wives whether the kids can have a sundae tonight.

Don't get me wrong. It's good to protect your family from all sorts of modern-day perils. But how different life looks now than a hundred years ago! The "fight" in our SRY gene doesn't get as much of a chance to stretch. But the "flight" part of the gene always stands ready to kick in. And because of that, men often leave their battles instead of engaging in them. They run away.

### **Performance Anxiety**

For most men, a big part of who we are is rooted in performance. We judge ourselves by how well we do on the playing field or in our jobs. We keep score.

No wonder fatherhood feels so scary for most of us. Our job title as "Dad" seems confusing and muddled. We can't be the heroes we see in our imagination. Sometimes we don't even know what it means to be a father. We sometimes don't know who our kids need us to be. Lots of us had fathers who were poor role models. We feel inadequate.

All those factors scream potential failure. "I don't think I'm

the right guy,” we’ll say. “I don’t think I’m good enough. I don’t think I know how to handle a crisis. I feel fearful. I feel fear in me.” Men don’t like these feelings of fear and uncertainty. They freak us out. And they make some of us want to run away, like a little boy.

It reminds me of my high school football days. I had some pretty good quarterback skills, and on the football field, I felt like I could take care of business. I knew what I was supposed to do, and I had a fair dose of confidence that I could do it. I felt in control of my destiny, that I could rise above the competition and win.

But outside of that arena, I felt completely inadequate. I see that as another common trait of men — that feeling of being able to perform well in certain areas but coming up totally inadequate in others. You go through your teen years feeling that you’re not handsome enough or smart enough or big enough, or that you have too many pimples. You see yourself as not very capable.

As a freshman in high school, I stood around in gym class behind a guy named Glen and one of his buddies. Now, Glen’s family produced a lot of great swimmers — I think one brother went to the Olympics — and all of them were these huge, muscular guys. Glen, two years older than me, was no exception. So there we all stood by the gym wall, with me trying to hide behind Glen as much as I could. I wanted to be invisible — me in my funky little trunks and Converse sneakers. I didn’t want anybody to notice me. I could vaguely hear Glen and his friend talking about something as they stood in front of me, but I didn’t pay much attention, until out of nowhere, Glen wheeled around, took the palm of his hand, and — *bam!* He hit me right in the chest. I literally heard the bone crack.

And then I realized that Glen and his buddy had been

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talking about *me*. His sternum jab was just his way, I guess, of violently pointing.

“See this guy? He hasn’t really filled out yet,” Glen said. “He’s kind of like a twig.” And they went on talking about how bodies change and guys get bigger as they get older. I felt like a science experiment, a lab specimen. Glen was just using me to prove a point. He didn’t want to pick a fight; he just wanted to use me as a frog. I had nowhere to go with that.

Before long, I became the school’s quarterback, and I filled out okay. And yet the insecurities of that one single moment stayed with me for a very long time.

I think almost every guy has messages of inadequacy. Rolling around inside us, we hear these messages that we don’t measure up. And those messages get constantly reinforced in the culture.

If we’re honest with ourselves, many of us feel the same inadequacies when it comes to fatherhood. I know I did. Even as I rocked Trent back and forth on the night of his birth, I felt rocked with doubt. I’d never had a good father, a dad I’d consider a role model. Would I fall down, just like my own dads did? I’d think, *Do I have what it takes? Yes? No?* And my answer almost had two halves. On one side — the competitive, football-playing side — I was like, *Yeah, I’ll get it done. I’ll do it.* The quarterback side of me thought, *We’ll score a touchdown. Come on, guys. We’re going to score a touchdown!* But behind all that huddled those massive doubts and insecurities. *Will we? Can I? Will I?*

### The Secret of Fatherhood

We all have insecurities boiling inside us. Our culture tells us incessantly what failures we are as fathers. Even our own genes

can throw up roadblocks. We don't get to be the heroes we feel like we should be. And so we fail. We lose interest. We'd rather play video games.

But we can't. We have to push aside those fears and insecurities and our own laziness — the “ways of childhood” the apostle Paul talks about (1 Corinthians 13:11). We have to transcend our own weaknesses and predilections and become the greater man. I think God calls us to do just that.

“For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want,” writes Paul in Galatians 5:17.

Sometimes we might wonder why our flesh and our Spirit always seem to be in such opposition. After all, God created both our bodies and souls. But I think the Lord sets up paradoxes in life in order to create environments for us to learn how to become more like him, situations that push against our natural inclinations and into a more God-honoring stance. It pushes us out of our comfort zone and forces us to lean on him more and more.

I like to think of it like this. We all live, in a sense, in boxes, with the whole box of life tilted in God's direction. We can fight, we can struggle, we can deny him, we can scream. We can do whatever to try to move away from him. But the elevation of the box on one side keeps cranking up until we reach a tipping point. Something snaps, and we fall to the other side. It's all about leaning into God.

Marriage thrusts us into such a box. You're selfish? You like calling your own shots? Get married. And if you're selfish too long, you're not going to be married long. You have to start giving.

Fatherhood is exactly the same thing. If some selfishness

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remains in you after marriage, then have some kids — and be responsible for them. Sure, you can have children all day long, as many men do, and have no accountability. But if you have a sense of responsibility for that child, you take up that mantle. Yes, it will be hard. You will not know how to deal with them very well, at least at first. You'll feel scared. You'll feel frustrated. It's hard because, in some ways, God knows it has to be hard for us. Only through that pain and difficulty do we grow ever more like him. Our flawed flesh and scared souls may give us pause. But according to Paul, "the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7).

And that, in the end, is the heart of it all, the secret of fatherhood — living in power, love, and self-discipline. Sometimes that goes against our instincts or what we'd like. But that's what God calls us to.

And at the center of it all, as Paul once again says, is *love*. Always hopeful, always trusting, always persevering. As a father, love is the key, the secret to everything. It's not rocket science. It's pretty easy, really. If you love your kids and you can show them that you love them, everything else falls into place.

And we need to love them as a *father*. We can't mother our children; most of our children already have great mothers. Don't be their mother. Be their dad. And what does it mean to be their dad? It means you do have to connect. Engage them in the way that you can. Be natural with it. Cut loose a little. It will come naturally to you. Turtles know what to do. Penguins know what to do. Other animals know what to do as dads. We human fathers know what to do too. Sure, circumstances have changed. Most of us can't talk about life with our boys while working in the fields anymore. But we can find opportunities, if we only look for them.

I mentioned earlier that many men don't even know the job requirements of fatherhood. But fatherhood's not a job, and it never has been. Being a father isn't something we *do*. It's something we *are*. That's hard for us to understand sometimes, being as task oriented as we are. But I think that's what Paul is getting at. We need to lean on love, push beyond our instincts, and go deeper. We don't set aside being a good dad when we're off the clock. It's something we become. And just as we're always in the process of unpacking our faith, growing ever closer to Jesus long after we become Christians, so the road to becoming a father is a never-ending journey. We're always learning how to be a good dad. We're always in the process of becoming one. And we never cast aside that process.

### **A Father's Love**

We talk about our moms as the center of the family. And in certain critical ways, they always will be.

But as fathers we have just as important a role to play in the lives of our boys and girls that goes beyond carrying the family's mantle of leadership. We must get back to the father's traditional roles of provision and protection. A picture comes to my mind — a big, old tree in the backyard, an oak that spreads its branches across the sky like open arms, an oak that kids filled with energy run to in the morning or sit beside for comfort in the afternoon. I think of that feeling of unshakeable security, that sense of always being there for you.

Just the other day I had a conversation with Troy, our youngest son. We planned to attend a play late that afternoon, a play he'd been looking forward to, but he wasn't feeling well. He had a bad head cold and sounded like he could use some chicken noodle soup and good rest.



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“Are you sure you want to go?” I asked him.

“Oh, I *do* want to see it,” he said.

“Well, you want to sit next to me so I can put my arm around you?” I asked. “Would that make you feel better?”

His whole countenance brightened. “Yeah!” he said.

That’s a pretty special feeling as a father, knowing your hug is as good, or as healing, in a way, as a bowl of chicken noodle soup. And even though that sounds very nurturing and motherly, I see it more as that old oak tree, always there to provide and protect.

When I think of what it means to be a dad, I think of a jolly father who says, “Come, come and sit on my lap. My boy, what did you do today? Did you make a mistake today? How did that go? What did you learn from that?” That may sound funny, but that’s the dad figure to me, a reflection of how I see our heavenly Father. Someone who’s always there, almost always smiling, always glad to see you, always glad to share a belly laugh. That father can be stern, but always in a loving way — never harsh, never cutting, never biting. Even when his kids know they’ve blown it, they don’t feel scared to talk with him about it. He fosters a relationship where his children can tell him anything. Consequences may come, even punishment. But in the midst of all that, he would never speak to them out of condemnation. His children would feel comfortable and safe speaking to him, no matter what they had done.

Is that an easy relationship dynamic to master? Hardly. Every one of us, even the greatest of dads, falls short. But it’s an ideal we should strive for every day. Fatherhood is about being engaged with your kids, talking with them, wrestling with them, holding them when they need to be held. It’s wanting to be there for the first step and all the steps thereafter, not fleeing into the safety of a man cave or escaping to the

security of work. Sure, career is important, but it's a short, flighty thing compared to your relationship with your kids. You may go through five or ten jobs during your working life. The relationship you have with your children lasts a lifetime. Or it should, and it will, if you connect with them emotionally when they're young.

### **Meeting the Challenge**

Of course, being a “big tree” or a jolly, welcoming father doesn't sound all that heroic. And maybe to some, it doesn't even sound all that manly. Picking up a Ken doll and playing with your daughter and her Barbie Dreamhouse sounds, well, just about as unmanly as you can get. It's not much like extinguishing a fire that very well might burn down the entire Grand Canyon.

But to me, the willingness to grab that Ken doll and play with your daughter for a while lies at the heart of true manhood.

Look in the Bible and you'll find that love, the secret to fatherhood, often gets explicitly tied to the idea of sacrifice. “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,” Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:7 (ESV). In Romans 12:1–2, he writes, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God— this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is— his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

The Lord wills that we be good fathers to our children and good husbands to our wives. Is manliness just brute power and

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strength and might? Or does it say, “I’m going to lay down my life for you”? On the surface, sacrifice can feel weak and powerless, but it’s not. It’s powerful. Christ may have looked weak and powerless on the cross during his moment of ultimate sacrifice, and yet that sacrifice remains the most powerful act the universe has ever seen.

It’s another paradox. We are at our strongest when we lay down our lives, even in small ways, for our wives and children — maybe especially in small ways. It’s hard to do. We get into arguments because we don’t always do it well. But I guess that’s why it’s called a “sacrifice.” If it were easy, it wouldn’t be a sacrifice.

When you look at healthy families, you see one common characteristic — *sacrificial men*. Men who take time out for their kids — even when they’d rather do something else. Men who talk with their kids — even when some part of them just wants to watch the football game. Men who deal patiently with their kids — even when they’ve got to mop up the spilled milk from the floor for the third time that week. When men do the right thing for their families and offer that life-giving sacrifice, it pays big dividends. The families that result from that kind of fatherly commitment enjoy robust health.

After a recent broadcast for Focus on the Family, Karen Ehman, author of *Let. It. Go.: How to Stop Running the Show and Start Walking in Faith*, told a powerful story to our producer that had to do with her husband, Todd.

When their kids were younger, Todd worked as a youth pastor, which, as any youth pastor will tell you, is a full-time job, plus about thirty or fifty more hours. One day, just after he got home from rappelling with his junior high group and got ready to walk out the door to do another team outreach thing, Todd knelt in front of his daughter, who was about four

at the time, and said, “Honey, I’m going to share Jesus with these teens, and I need your prayers.”

“Oh good, Daddy!” his daughter said, quite sincerely. “When are you going to stay home and share Jesus with me?”

Todd left his ministry position, took a job at GM as a line assemblyman, and started getting home at five every day. He still does ministry, but he stayed home every night with his kids as they grew up. That’s courageous fathering. I know it convicted me.

I’m not saying everyone should follow Todd’s example. My own job sometimes requires travel and time away that I’d like to spend at home. It requires balance. But as fathers, we have to challenge ourselves to make sacrifices for our kids. We need to not only tell them that we love them but also show them that they’re among the most important people in the world to us. That might sometimes lead us to make radical choices. But being a dad is, or at least it should be, a pretty radical experience.

When my stepfather walked out of our family’s life forever, he told us he couldn’t deal with it. That, to me, is the antithesis of fatherhood. God calls us as men to deal with discomforting situations such as the ones fatherhood can put us in. We’re called to sacrifice for our families. We’re called to be the men our wives and children need, and the heroes God wants us to be.

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**TO THINK ABOUT**

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1. As a father, did you ever experience times when you felt like you couldn't deal with a situation anymore? Times when you wanted to run away? How did you get over those times?
2. Describe the most heroic thing you've ever done.
3. How have you sacrificed for your family? Are there areas in your life where you feel you should sacrifice more?

# ***The Good Dad***

## **BECOMING THE FATHER YOU WERE MEANT TO BE**

By Jim Daly

It's never too late to be a better father Jim Daly, president and CEO of Focus on the Family, is an expert in fatherhood—in part because his own 'fathers' failed him so badly. His biological dad was an alcoholic. His stepfather deserted him. His foster father accused Jim of trying to kill him. All were out of Jim's life by the time he turned 13.

Isn't it odd—and reminiscent of the hand of God—that the director of the leading organization on family turned out to be a guy whose own background as a kid and son were pretty messed up? Or could it be that successful parenting is discovered not in the perfect, peaceful household but in the midst of battles and messy situations, where God must constantly be called to the scene? That is the mystery unraveled in this book.

Using his own expertise, humor, and inexhaustible wealth of stories, Jim will show you that God can make you a good dad, a great dad, in spite of the way you've grown up and in spite of the mistakes you've made. Maybe even because of them. It's not about becoming a perfect father. It's about trying to become a better father, each and every day. It's about building relationships with your children through love, grace, patience, and fun—and helping them grow into the men and women they're meant to be.

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