

THE
SMART
STEPFAMILY

7 Steps to a Healthy Family

RON L. DEAL



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All names and recognizable details have been changed to protect the privacy of those who have shared their stories for this book.

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To my wife and best friend, Nan
Three diamonds
All my love, for all my life

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Foreword

Not all stepfamilies are alike. Some have young children; others, teenagers or young adults. Some are the result of divorce, while others come after the death of a spouse. However, there is one thing every stepfamily has in common: family members have a history that involved at least one other parent and spouse. Memories of the past may be pleasant or painful, but those memories do influence attitudes and emotions.

The high divorce rate in first marriages indicates that building a loving, supportive, caring marital relationship is not easy. However, those who succeed find marriage to be very satisfying. The fact that the divorce rate is higher for second marriages indicates that building a second marriage is even more difficult. Those who succeed find it worth the effort.

For those who have been widowed, the first marriage may have been a wonderful relationship or one with many struggles. If the relationship was fulfilling, they anticipate the second marriage will be fully as good as the first. But without help, many of them may be disappointed.

Almost every week someone says to me, “Have you written anything on blended families?” (sometimes they say stepfamilies). My answer is always the same: “No, but I know someone who has.” I then recommend *The Smart Stepfamily* by Ron Deal. I recommend this book with confidence because I know the ideas that Ron shares are practical. The first edition of the book made a vital contribution to the field of marriage and family ministry. Ron was one of the first to identify the challenges of stepfamilies and to offer a road to success. Many pastors and counselors use *The Smart Stepfamily* in their premarital counseling for couples who are getting married for the

second or third time. Parent educators use it in helping those parents who are bringing children into a new family setting.

The Smart Stepfamily has awakened the church to the need of stepfamily ministry. I remember the couple who said to me a year after I had recommended the book, “Thanks for sharing with us Ron Deal’s book on stepfamilies. It has been a lifesaver for us.” I will continue to highly recommend this book to all couples who are involved in bringing two families together.

This new edition is packed with even more practical tools to strengthen stepfamilies. It also includes information for couples who are dating and contemplating creating a stepfamily. The research in the book has been updated and new guidance is given on money management and estate planning, which are often areas of conflict in stepfamilies. Ron discusses the pros and cons of adoption. You will also find realistic ways to approach step-sibling relationships, parent alienation syndrome, and adult stepfamilies.

One of the reasons this book is so helpful to couples is that Ron does not write from an ivory tower. For twenty years he has invested his life in helping couples create healthy relationships. As a counselor, he has taken couples where they are and led them to where they wanted to be when they got married. No one enters a second marriage with the desire to repeat the failures of the first. And yet, without help, many of them do.

Not everyone can find a counselor who is equipped to deal with the common struggles of stepfamilies. However, when you read *The Smart Stepfamily* you will find yourself sitting in the office of a counselor with great experience.

No two stepfamilies are alike, but this book offers clear advice on how to solve the common challenges faced by all who enter a second marriage with children. I highly recommended the first edition, and I am even more excited about this new edition.

—Gary Chapman, PhD, author of *The Five Love Languages*

Preface to the Revised Edition

A lot has happened since 1997, when I first started writing this book (which was first published in 2002). More specifically, a lot has happened with families and with me personally; together these changes necessitated in my mind the need for a revised and expanded edition of this book. More on these changes in a moment.

A few things, however, have not changed. For one, the core principles of this book—which work, by the way. Thousands have written me through the years expressing their appreciation for the key steps outlined in this book.

Consider this post from Lisa:

I read *The Smart Stepfamily* four years ago when I remarried. It was such a help and truly helped me to STAY married! You helped me realize how difficult stepfamily bonding would be and you were right! My first marriage of twenty-one years ended quite suddenly. When I remarried, my three daughters were seventeen, nineteen, and twenty-one. My stepson was nineteen, and his dad, my now husband, had been single for fifteen years before we married. One year after we married, my stepson came to live with us for two years. Then my youngest daughter moved in! Your wise advice helped me to be extremely patient, and slowly all the relationships are stabilizing.

Lisa, like many people, experienced multiple transitions and dynamics in her family that she couldn't control, but the principles she learned in this book prepared her to cope.

I could also tell you of others who have benefitted from this book. For example, I could tell you about a widow and widower who married later

in life and found marriage and stepparenting far more difficult than they had anticipated, but who now have a healthy, growing family.

I could tell you about a couple with a complicated history, including multiple divorces, seven children, four grandchildren, substantial financial assets, and a new child born to the marriage, that is strong and loving each other through challenges with ex-spouses and cancer.

I could tell you about dating couples who decided to give more time to dating before jumping into marriage only to write me a few years into the marriage and thank me for helping to ease their transition to becoming a family. Apparently their patience paid off.

I could tell you about dating couples who decided not to marry at all—and thanked me for helping them to “dodge a bullet.”

And I could tell you about a dedicated thirty-year-old Christian who shouted cuss words at her father when he told her he was getting remarried, but who five years later was showering words of love and affirmation on her stepmom on a national radio broadcast. They were all helped by this book—and I believe you will be too, if you apply the concepts to your family with wisdom and prayer.

But while the core principles of the first edition of this book have not changed (I think you’ll love the new material added to this revised edition), some things have. From a cultural perspective, stepfamilies, for example, have become even more prevalent in American society and in cultures around the world than they were twelve years ago. One study found that in America today, 40 percent of married couples with children are stepcouples (a term I will use throughout the book to refer to couples in which one or both of them had a child from a previous relationship before they married).¹ The specific statistics vary by race (55 percent of African American, 39 percent of white, and 36 percent of Hispanic married couples with kids are stepcouples), but the conclusion is the same—stepfamilies are part of the norm in our culture, comprising a huge people group that must be considered part of mainstream American life.

This increase in stepfamilies has also been witnessed in countries around the world. When I first released this book, I had no idea it would be purchased in places like Australia, Great Britain, South Africa, Canada, Singapore, New Zealand, etc., or that I would be interviewed by reporters and radio broadcasters throughout the world. I suppose, though, I should have

anticipated that the number of stepfamilies around the world would increase, and with it, the demand for practical help.

Many other social changes have occurred as well:

- The most common societal term for stepfamilies has shifted from stepfamily to blended family (although in Europe and Australia the most commonly searched term is still *stepfamily* or a derivative, such as *stepparent*).
- Blended families and cohabiting stepcouples (87 percent of cohabiting couples with children are stepcouples)² are a common premise for TV shows and movies.
- There is a national Stepfamily Day (September 16).
- Stepfamily ministry has slowly become a recognized area of marriage and family ministry.

I should mention here that the original edition of this book concluded with a chapter on stepfamily ministry and the church. My editor asked me why a book for stepcouples needed a chapter on ministry. I defended the strategy by saying, “You must understand that couples in stepfamilies are the ones starting small groups and teaching ministries, not the pastors. It’s grassroots at this point. We have to empower couples to do this or it won’t get done.” That was true at the time. However, I’m pleased to say that the tide has shifted; now it is pastors who primarily ask for training, resources, or conference events in their churches. Though I still want to encourage couples to ignite ministry groups in their communities, we opted in this edition of the book to delete the chapter on stepfamily ministry (in part to make room for more content on stepfamily living). However, you can access that and other free bonus material at SmartStepfamilies.com/view/learn.

There has also been an increase in stepfamily research; we simply know more about stepfamilies than we used to. Specifically, we know more about what makes stepfamilies work and how they can overcome their challenges. I will offer these new insights throughout this edition.

There have been a lot of changes in my life as well that have changed my writing, speaking, and insight into stepfamily living (anyone who tells you that the personal lives of authors doesn’t impact their writing is sorely

misguided). In brief, a family tragedy has changed me and has opened my eyes to what the first volume of this book failed to offer.

I'll share more details throughout this book, but in 2009, my middle son, Connor, died at the age of twelve. His body was attacked by MRSA, a staph infection that no one saw coming. His journey from first symptom to death lasted just ten days. My family's journey through grief will last until we meet him again in eternity. I've shared various aspects of this experience in other books, *The Smart Stepdad* and *Dating and the Single Parent* specifically, and I've talked about my loss in conferences throughout the country. When I looked back at the first edition of this book, I realized I needed to say more about the impact of grief. Loss is a universal experience among both children and adults in stepfamilies. Losing a child is in some ways far different from losing a spouse to death or for a child losing their family to divorce, but in other ways, it is very similar. Throughout this revised edition, I will share with you my insights and lessons learned as they pertain to loss, your family, parenting, and trusting again.*

For over a decade this book has, to my delight, offered practical help to families around the world. A few things have changed over that time; a few things haven't. One more that hasn't changed is my desire to bring a blessing to your home. I pray that something you read offers hope, promise, and practical help for your life.

**The following Bonus Material and Deleted Chapters
from the first edition are available free online:**

- Smart Questions, Smart Answers—Topics include difficult ex-spouses, the needs of children, co-parenting strategies, stepparenting, military stepfamilies, dealing with family conflict, stepgrandparenting, and more.
- Ministering to Stepfamilies—I estimate that traditional marriage ministry and parent training are about half of what stepfamily couples need. Learn what your congregation can do to prevent redivorce and break the generational cycle of divorce.

This and more is available at SmartStepfamilies.com/view/learn.

* To learn more about the nonprofit we have created in Connor's memory and to hear his beautiful voice, visit ConnorsSong.com.

Acknowledgments

for the Revised and Expanded Edition

The dedication of Bethany House Publishers to enriching the lives of stepfamilies is amazing. When I wrote the first edition of this book, I had no idea that Bethany House and I would go on to publish many more books together or that they would come to me a decade after this book was first released and inquire about a revised and expanded edition. They have taken many risks on behalf of blended families and are to be commended. It has been a wonderful partnership. To everyone at Bethany House, I say thank you. Specifically, I should mention Ellen Chalifoux, Carra Carr, Brett Benson, Tim Peterson, Julie Smith, Steve Oates, and Jim Parrish. What a team!

To my agent, Chip MacGregor, again I say, “You’re the best.” Two parts coach, one part counselor, three parts strategist, and best-part friend.

Nan, none of this would happen without your support. Thanks for tolerating my five a.m. writing schedule. And thank you for giving your blessing for me to share our sacred sorrow about Connor with others.

A very special word of appreciation goes to all the families who have shared their lives and stories with me through the years. You have taught me much about the stepfamily journey and in turn have been a blessing to others.

And finally, to the One who gives me eternal hope and life and purpose, I have very little to give but my praise. It’s all yours.

Acknowledgments

for the First Edition

Like any healthy stepfamily, this book has taken a long time to develop. And like any healthy stepfamily, this book is the result of a careful integration of people, ideas, backgrounds, and relationships. I am grateful to so many who have offered their encouragement and talent along the way—this book could not have been created without your help.

Special appreciation goes to Ashleigh Short Givens and David and Robbie Hutchins for their early reviews of the manuscript and technical writing input. You helped this project get noticed and ultimately published—thank you. Also, a special thank-you goes to Rebecca Warnick for her administrative support and to the Southwest Church of Christ elders for their encouragement. Your vision for a family ministry that extends beyond the Jonesboro community has resulted in a ministry whose borders, by God's grace, are expanding daily. I couldn't have done this without your blessing.

Others whose friendship and professionalism have made this journey possible include H. Norman Wright, Steve Laube and the Bethany House team, Dr. Margorie Engel and the Stepfamily Association of America's board of directors and institute faculty, and the researchers and clinicians whose work is referenced throughout this book. I must especially acknowledge the work and influence of Dr. Emily Visser, whose life has come to an end, but whose inspiration and research will live on. This book stands on the shoulders of her scholarly research, shared writing with her husband,

Acknowledgments

John, and personal stepfamily experience. Yet equally impacting was her encouragement of me as a young writer and teacher. I am exceedingly grateful for her influence and wisdom. Also, to the original Southwest Step-by-Step education group, I say thanks. You boldly supported each other and shared your stories with me so that I might help others. You have blessed my life; I hope you have been blessed in return.

To my dearest friends and spiritual partners, Randy and Judy Lewis, Gregg and Elisa Barden, Shawn and Arlene Mayes, and Jeff and Misty Floyd—your encouragement and faith have challenged me to be used by God through this book and seminar ministry. Let's give him the glory!

Introduction

Have you ever tried to put together a 3-D jigsaw puzzle without instructions and without a picture on the box to show you what the final product should look like? Try adding a blindfold. Sounds impossible, doesn't it? In fact, it may not even sound fun to try. Attempt to combine members of two (or more) different households and you'll encounter similar frustrations.

Putting together or *integrating* a stepfamily is one of the most difficult tasks for any family in America today. Integration involves combining two unique family histories and styles, various personalities and preferences, differing traditions, relational pasts and loyalties. Yet most people make the decision to bring two families together without consulting any guidelines or instructions or taking the time to develop a shared image of what the final jigsaw puzzle will look like (e.g., how the stepfamily will feel, operate, and conduct itself). Blinded with a well-intentioned ignorance, couples march down the aisle a second or third time only to discover that the building process is much more difficult than they anticipated, especially in the beginning.

But here's the good news that thousands of couples and families have learned from reading this book: Take your blindfold off and learn what a healthy blended family is and does, and the odds of your success increase dramatically. When you know how to be a smart stepfamily, integration, or the merging of your two families, is accelerated and the rewards to both children and adults increase dramatically.

Adult Stepfamilies

Later-life couples with adult children, or what we might call adult stepfamilies, often mistakenly assume that because their children are out of the home the family won't have difficulty integrating. They quickly realize that they have just as many adjustments and challenges as stepfamilies with younger children. The specific stressors will vary, but the emotional demands are similar.

Working Smarter, Not Harder

The purpose of this book is to give you a healthy picture of a successful stepfamily. And believe it or not, it can be done *if* you work smarter, not harder. Working smarter essentially means understanding the dynamics of stepfamily life and development and making intentional decisions about how you will grow together emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.

In the book *The Smart Stepmom*, Laura Petherbridge and I tell the story of a never-married forty-something woman who became a stepmother when she married a man with three teenage daughters. The first couple of years she and her husband struggled with parenting issues; no matter what the subject, they seemed to end up on different sides. Then one day something dawned on the stepmom. She put it this way, "I just figured out that I live in a stepfamily, but my husband doesn't." What she meant was that her husband was a married man with three daughters and didn't see his relationship with his wife or kids as competing, nor did he feel like he was choosing sides if he shared a daughter's perspective with his wife. However, the experience of the home for the stepmom was very different. She constantly felt on pins and needles trying to gain favor with the girls and status as a parent figure, and she felt jealous of her husband's attempts to get her to see things from the kids' point of view.

That insight not only made her smarter, it caused her to stop working harder. For example, she let go of the feeling that she had to get her husband to see everything from her perspective (something that caused her to argue with him to no end). This gave birth to a strange peace within her even when her husband seemed not to understand her plight as a stepmom. How could he understand? His experience of the family was going to be different. Didn't this mean she was going to be isolated in her experience?

Ironically, no. Once she relaxed from trying to change her husband's mind all the time, she noticed that he had been prioritizing her all along. Each smart step resulted in another smart step that gradually, but powerfully, shifted the family toward health. Not every aspect of the family became comfortable, but many things improved significantly.

If you are currently married and perhaps finding that your three-dimensional puzzle is resting on a fragile foundation, read this book with an eye for what you can change. Once you've developed concrete ideas for putting the pieces of your family together, begin working the plan cautiously but with much determination. You'll be amazed at God's power to heal your heartaches and turn your unstable or crumbling puzzle into an edifice that is safe, beautiful, and built on a firm foundation.

If you are currently single, divorced, or widowed and are considering marriage, and if one or both of you have children, you've turned to the right source. There are many hidden challenges in stepfamily life, and you need to be as prepared as you possibly can be. Taking off your blindfold and seeing clearly the journey ahead is the best choice you can make. Indeed, your decision to form a stepfamily by marriage needs to be an informed choice; otherwise you may regret the decision once the challenges hit you head-on. Smart stepfamilies can bring great joy and fulfillment to the lives of children and adults. But please understand that a great deal of work and determination are required to develop a healthy stepfamily. You cannot afford to go into marriage armed only with "better than last time" intentions. The process demands that you know and understand more than that. This book will tell you what you need to know.

Please know that this book has grown out of the belief that the home is the primary context in which we learn and experience the character of love. It is my firm belief that stepfamilies, just as biological families, can be homes of love. Compared to biological families, a few challenges will be different and some will be the same. But love can be what holds the jigsaw pieces of the smart stepfamily together, resulting not in a bunch of broken, disconnected pieces, but a home.

I am more optimistic than ever about the redemptive power of healthy stepfamilies. I'll talk about this further in chapter 1, but you should know right now that God wants to work through your current marriage, parenting, and family relationships to redeem your story of loss, sadness,

Introduction

heartbreak, and brokenness, to offer healing, and to turn your home into a haven of safety that blesses your children. How life is now and how you got here may not have been how you would have written the script, but given that you're in the middle of the story already, God wants to author a redemptive narrative to the remaining chapters. Your family story is still being written and the best is yet to come.

Now, speaking of a story, let me give you some perspective on the typical stepfamily story . . . from beginning to end, or should I say, from Egypt to the Promised Land.

The people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew. [He was concerned about them.]

Exodus 2:23–25

Headed for the Promised Land!

Can you imagine what freedom must have been like to the Israelites? For some four hundred years they had been oppressed by the Egyptians, held in bondage against their will, and forced to live as slaves. For years the Lord had heard their cries, and now the time had finally come for freedom. It's hard to imagine the joy, relief, and utter exuberance the Israelites must have felt. They were going home! But where, exactly, was home?

Moses, a rather unsung hero at the time, through God's power had become their leader. A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night made it obvious that God was leading his people to the Promised Land. Yet the joy and celebration of being set free was soon quenched when the Israelites found themselves hemmed in by the Red Sea on one side and an angry Pharaoh—who had changed his mind about letting them go—and his army on the other. In their terror the Israelites cried out,

Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: "Leave us alone that we may serve

the Egyptians”? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.

Exodus 14:11–12

Did you catch that? Isn't it amazing how quickly, when under duress, the Israelites changed their tune? Just a few days before they had seen the mighty hand of God work on their behalf. Just a few days had passed since miracles had taken place to free them, and yet their joy and celebration turned to self-pity in a heartbeat. *Certainly we are going to die because of our horrible leader, Moses*, they thought. “What have you done to us?” they accused. And then you'll see, in my opinion, the most fascinating aspect of their response: “It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians.” This suggests they were *longing for the circumstances of slavery and oppression over freedom*. Freedom from slavery was what the Israelites pleaded for and yet oppression and bondage actually became attractive to them as soon as the journey became difficult. Their trust was gone, their self-pity took over, and they longed for safety. The security of slavery was often more inviting than the insecurity of traveling an unmarked road to an unknown destination. They just hadn't learned how to trust God to give purpose and provision in unfamiliar territory.

Many stepfamilies walk a similar path.

1

Through Wilderness Wanderings

“Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today.”

Exodus 14:11–13

Disillusionment is nearly a universal experience for the adults in stepfamilies, and it often occurs within a couple of years. Believing that remarriage will release them from the bondage of divorce, loss, loneliness, and painful emotions, couples load up their children and possessions and launch into the wilderness toward the Promised Land of marriage and family life. The wedding seems to mark a release from oppression. *At last*, they think, *I am loved and important again. I am free from the confines of single-parent living and my children will have the benefit of a two-parent family. This is going to be great!*

But just as with the Israelites, what often occurs for couples in stepfamilies is a shift from celebration and positive expectation to self-pity. The realities and challenges of stepfamily living overwhelm unrealistic fantasies, and disillusionment sets in.

Remarriage or a stepfamily marriage for most adults seems to be their second (or third) chance on life. Already life hasn't worked out the way they planned, and to some degree or another life has been painful. But things are looking up—they've fallen in love again and the dream of a normal family life has returned. A new journey of hope has begun.

The journey, however, almost always takes some unexpected turns. For example, your spouse's dedication to his or her children was noble before the wedding, but now seems to be a challenge to your marriage; a teenager living in one of the other homes decides to live with you; parenting styles differ more than you expected, and conflict erupts frequently. The trip is filled with uncertainty, and couples realize they feel lost much of the time. Like the Israelites, people sometimes think, "Is this marriage going to die, too?" "Who is to blame for bringing me out to the wilderness?" "I feel trapped—maybe it would have been better to stay in Egypt." Meanwhile, the daily grind of stepfamily life continues and progress is slow. It seems like being lost in the wilderness.

Let me pause for a moment and make a quick prediction. Those of you who were feeling disillusioned before you picked up this book are now thinking, "Oh my, has Ron been peeking in our windows? How did he know I felt this way?" On the other hand, those of you who haven't yet reached a place where you feel caught between Pharaoh and his army and the Red Sea—usually dating or recently remarried couples—are thinking, "What is Ron trying to do, scare us to death?"

Let me assure you, I'm not trying to be a pessimist or a killjoy. I am trying to be realistic. I have spent more than twenty years as a stepfamily therapist, coach, educator, and researcher, and I've heard the stories enough to know what is normal. There are some stepfamilies whose journey from Egypt to the Promised Land is quick and painless, but for the vast majority, the journey takes much longer than anticipated. Because I care about your family, I promise to shoot straight with you—more important, I promise to guide you through the wilderness. But you do need to acknowledge that feeling lost in the wilderness is par for the course.

Let me share a different situation that is similar in creating disillusionment. Since the death of my son (the Preface provides some background to his death), I have a whole new set of life issues and circumstances that make me feel lost much of the time. How do I grieve well? How do I help my wife and other two sons grieve? How do I parent my sons—when should compassion for their sadness moderate my expectations and when does sympathy get in the way of instruction and discipline? When will this generalized depression about life go away, and how do I function as a father, husband, and employee in the meantime? Will life ever feel normal again? Do I always tell every new person I meet about Connor, and what do I do when they quickly skip over or flat-out ignore the largest piece of my life story? What do I have to do to feel normal in a crowd of people, instead of odd and like an outsider?

It's my guess that you, too, have a set of unanswered questions like this. There is a new normal in my life and yours—and much of it is unwelcomed. Much of it is not within our control and we have to find our way through. There's no going back. With God's help, we will find our way through the wilderness. As I implied, finding our way starts in part by acknowledging common stepfamily struggles and feelings in the journey.

Don't Look Now; We're Being Pursued!

Just as the Israelites found themselves caught between the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army, so stepcouples frequently find themselves caught between the future and the past. Behind them, debilitating pain and loss from the days of bondage (divorce or death of a spouse) are quickly pursuing. In the present, feelings of anger, resentment, rejection, and guilt siphon energy from people's emotional tanks, while losses too numerous to count (especially for children) make for cautious emotional investments with new

Hold on to Hope

Because "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life" (Proverbs 13:12), make sure to hold on to hope. A common emotional experience for couples is first anticipation and excitement, then disillusionment and fear, then struggle and discouragement, then satisfaction and safety. Allow hope to see you through each season.

stepfamily members. In short, the pain of the past makes for a tremendous fear of the future. Consider these statements from the Thomas family:

BIOLOGICAL MOTHER, MEGAN: *"I'm afraid it's not going to work, and we'll get divorced. And then three times I've failed. I'm afraid Frank [her new husband] is going to get aggravated with his stepchildren—my kids—and he's going to walk because as he's already said, 'There's only so much I can take.' I'm afraid my kids are going to turn against me because they didn't want Frank as their stepfather. It would just be another failure."*

OLDER SON, JOHN (AGE SEVENTEEN): *"I'm afraid of getting close to anyone. I'm not very trusting. With all I've had to live through, I keep waiting for it to happen all over again—the constant blaming and getting stuck in the middle. And I won't let it ever happen again."*

MIDDLE DAUGHTER, SUSAN (AGE FIFTEEN): *"I ain't afraid of nothing. I'm not scared of anything. I mean, if you broke up, it wouldn't be the first time. I might be a little worried where we'd go or something like that. But as far as you breaking up, I mean, two times gets you ready for it to happen at any moment."*

YOUNGER SON, RANDY (AGE FOURTEEN): *"I try to get closer sometimes but then the fear happens and I hide out from doing things with Frank and keep farther apart from him than I should be. . . . I want to get close, but not too close, for fear of something that might happen in the future."*

STEPFATHER, FRANK: [regarding his marriage] *"I'm afraid to be in another relationship where I'm nobody and have no say about what's going on in the house. [Regarding the stepchildren] I'm afraid that if we don't change things right away, they're going to grow up and we'll never have a relationship. They'll just be stepkids who come and visit at holidays. I don't want it to be that way."*

It's easy to hear that the pain of their past is driving their fears of the future, which, in turn, is leading them to be guarded and untrusting in the present. If these heartaches and losses are not successfully resolved for this family (and yours), the result will be a tired, disillusioned couple unable to draw close to each other, let alone meet the emotional needs of their children. Painful emotions from the past must be resolved in order for you and your children to move on.

Are These Fears Typical?

Not all family members have this much fear. Kids, for example, can sometimes be very excited about the new family, but they can be confused about it at the same time. Adult fears seem to escalate when dilemmas generate feelings of uncertainty. Fears are common; don't panic when facing them. Recognize them and the actions they lead you to take (these actions are often problematic). Focus on understanding fears and preventing them from determining your actions. Fearful responses are often experienced by others as unloving ones.

Facing a Sea of Opposition

Blended families face a Sea of Opposition. Common uncharted waters include:

- achieving marital intimacy after being hurt
- parenting and stepparenting roles and rules
- questions of spiritual integrity and church involvement
- how to integrate the members of a stepfamily over time
- dealing with ex-spouses and co-parenting issues
- helping children emotionally and spiritually
- handling sexual pressures between stepsiblings
- issues of money management and financial autonomy

Be careful not to let these common issues change the direction of your heart. It's not uncommon for persons to start wondering, much like the Israelites did, if maybe they should return to the bondage of Egypt, that is, divorce or single-parent living. Sure, it was miserable and unfulfilling, but at least they knew what they had. Disillusionment gives birth to grumbling, complaining, and conflict. Emotions run high and problems escalate. Here is a common story: The stepparent, who from an outsider's position can more clearly see and feel the disharmony in the home, often voices this disillusionment first. The biological parent, who is still blinded by their strong relationship with their children, frequently discounts the stepparent's request for change. Slowly but surely, this builds distance and blame in the

couple's relationship. To make matters worse, this often comes at a time when they are trying to figure out how to manage their family and really can't afford to be out of touch.

The temptation to return to Egypt continues: "What have I done? Maybe I should have stayed single. Maybe God has abandoned me." Wrong! While I doubt that the God of the universe will reveal a path to you with a cloud or pillar of fire as he did the Israelites, he has most certainly not abandoned you and will provide strength and direction for your journey, even when the path seems dismal.

If there is one message that stepfamilies need to hear, it's this: *There is a stepfamily Promised Land of marital intimacy, interpersonal connectedness, and spiritual redemption! God has not abandoned you. If you will listen, trust, and continue walking by faith, you will hear him confirming your journey, offering guidance and healing, and providing a path on dry ground. But you must trust him.* Don't be like most remarried couples who end their journey in divorce within the first three years; they quit before ever crossing the Sea of Opposition or finding the rewards on the other side. God beckons you to remain persistent and see your family through to the Promised Land. There is a reward to be gained. But you must hold God's hand and walk through your Sea of Opposition.

Is the Journey Difficult for All Stepfamilies?

Stepfamilies vary greatly in composition and complexity. While it isn't always true, generally speaking the greater the complexity, the greater the family stress. For example, some stepfamilies have children from just one spouse and involve only one household. This usually occurs after the death of a parent and a remarriage to a stepparent without children. (This is not to imply that the death of a parent makes stepfamily living easy; it is just less complex.) Other stepfamilies are much more multifaceted with "yours, mine, and ours" children, two or more ex-spouses, plenty of stepparents and stepgrandparents, and visitation schedules to multiple households.

Not all stepfamilies have a difficult journey, but most will experience unexpected challenges. Some will face a great many barriers. It is important to remember that the number of barriers you face reflects neither on you nor on whether or not you should have married. When encountering

opposition, some people convince themselves that it wasn't a good idea to marry in the first place. Then they begin looking for a way out.

When stepfamily life gets tough, remain dedicated to your commitment. A man once drove six hours to talk with me about his stepchildren and marriage. He hoped that once I heard him describe the Sea of Oppositions he was facing, I would give him "permission" to leave the marriage. I did not (and he was terribly annoyed). What I did do was agree with him that the marriage, in its present condition, was not healthy, nor was God honored by an angry, resentful relationship. I suggested that with guided help he could choose to work on his marriage and remain open to how the God of the impossible might provide a path through the Sea of Opposition. Furthermore, avoiding divorce by simply tolerating a miserable marriage, I suggested, does not honor God. Commitment requires that you strive for a better life together, even when you don't feel like putting forth your best effort or have convinced yourself the marriage should never have happened. Ironically, people who make the effort often discover the safe marriage they had given up on.

A Quick Word to Dating Couples

To those of you who are perhaps engaged or considering remarriage, I am so glad you are reading this book now. I can't tell you how many couples attending my stepfamily seminars have said, "Why didn't anyone ever tell us these things before we married? We could have saved ourselves a lot of grief if we would have only known." May I suggest you learn from their experience? Keep reading with these intentions:

- Use this book to enlighten yourself to the possible struggles you may face in your stepfamily journey.
- Equip yourself and your relationship with practical strategies to meet the challenges.
- Use the stories and information here to help you make an informed decision about marriage.

Remarriage and stepfamily life can be filled with many blessings, but the journey probably won't start out that way. You'll have to work diligently

to reach the Promised Land. To that end, have you truly considered the costs? Do you know what the costs are? This book will help you identify them. I've also written an entire book walking single parents and those dating them through the process of meeting someone, dating well, making decisions about marriage, and planning for stepfamily living—all with an awareness of the children throughout the process. I highly recommend you take the time to read *Dating and the Single Parent* so that you manage your dating and marital decisions with wisdom.

In addition, I recommend that you find a group of stepfamilies or a stepfamily couple in your church or community and ask them some questions:

- What do they wish they had known before they remarried?
- What are their three greatest challenges?
- How could they have better prepared themselves for stepfamily living?
- What painful emotions from the past did they not resolve well prior to remarriage?
- What blessings have they experienced at this point in their journey?

The lure of marriage is tremendous. *Finally*, you think, *someone to take care of me. I feel so good when I'm with them.* But stepfamily life is so much more than just your couple relationship; it also includes children, loss, and a variety of family complexities. In biological families, the couple's relationship (i.e., the marriage) provides the foundation to the family from day one. In stepfamilies, the parent-child bonds predate the couple's relationship, often making the marriage the weakest relationship in the home

The Wrong Time to Date

Parenting responsibilities should impact the timing of dating. For example, I discourage dating if one child is struggling with emotional issues (anger or defiance, depression or anxiety) or is displaying prodigal behavior. These children need a focused, available parent, not one dividing their time. Plus, kids don't need to add to their concerns feeling unimportant or in competition with a parent's new love. Help your child through a difficult season, and then open yourself to romance. This order will also make the child's acceptance of a new stepfamily more likely should dating lead to marriage.

and vulnerable to family stress. Being in love with someone who “makes me feel good again” is just the beginning of what it takes to survive. In *Dating and the Single Parent*, I put it this way: “Coupleness” does not necessarily lead to “familyness.” They are two separate processes; falling in love with a person does not necessarily mean you can be a family. So please, do yourself and your children a favor—find out everything you can about stepfamily living, and count the cost before deciding to marry. If after much prayer and dating you do marry, give it everything you’ve got, and trust God to lead you through.

Kids Talk

“I wish she would recognize her own impulsivity and emotional roller coaster. She does and says things without recognizing that to some extent our whole family is dating this guy.” —Rachel, twenty-two years old¹

The God Who Heals

Shortly after escaping from Pharaoh’s army, the Israelites journeyed through the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled, and the only water they found was bitter and not fit for consumption. Again the people complained, and again God provided for his people. God had Moses throw a piece of wood into the unpalatable water, turning it sweet. God then refers to himself as Jehovah-Rophe, the “LORD who heals you” (Exodus 15:26 NIV). In so doing, God declares a promise. If his people will listen to his voice and do what is right in his eyes, he will heal—he will make the bitter waters of their life sweet again.

I believe God is waiting for a chance to heal your past hurts and to eliminate all that pursues you. But that’s not all he offers. He will provide strength to keep your commitments, and he will provide wisdom to overcome the obstacles that lie ahead. He wants you to be successful. But you can’t rely on yourself. Depend on him and he will clear a path.

Food for the Journey

Water was not all that God provided for the Israelites. He also caused manna and quail to rain down upon the people. Similarly, I suggest two

Getting Smart Has Benefits

“We sing the praises of your seminar to everyone. God totally answered our prayer. It was five years of hard trials and not knowing what to do with our family and why certain members acted the way they did. God painted a clear picture through your conference. It has been eight months since the seminar and God has changed us so much. My family is awesome. The children are different because of it and so are we.”
—David and Tracy

types of food to help nourish your journey: practical information and support from fellow travelers. This book will provide the practical stepfamily information. After laying down some key stepping-stones for the stepfamily journey, I will discuss common challenges to the stepfamily and provide practical guidance.

But don't stop there. I highly recommend you find another couple or a group of couples and meet together on a regular basis to study and encourage one another. Discussion questions for individual dating and married couples are included at the end of each chapter in this book, but just the two of you talking is not the same as meeting with a group of couples. I have been involved in support and therapy groups for

a number of years, and stepfamily groups are among the most dynamic I've seen. The common stories that are shared and the pressures and crises that are experienced together create an incredible bond among group members. My small-group material, *The Smart Stepfamily Small Group Resource DVD* and accompanying *Participant's Guide*, is an educational resource you'll want to consider. Watching the teaching video and discussing the group questions will help you process the information in this book, internalize it, and apply it in your home. For more on leading an educational group or stepfamily ministry, see SmartStepfamilies.com/view/learn.

Is It All Worth It?

Tim was remarried, and after three years he was just beginning to understand how difficult the journey was going to be. His life experience had shown him that the stepfamily journey can be tough, and now he was hearing me confirm that in a live seminar. During one of the breaks, this conscientious thirty-eight-year-old man asked an honest question: “I'm beginning to think the payoff can't be worth all this hard work. It feels like

I'm married to my wife, and she's still married to her kids. That makes it very hard for me to work at liking and accepting them. If you don't know what you'll have in a few years, is it worth the effort?"

He spoke for many people who silently wonder if they're heading down a dead-end street. My answer is no, you're not. A smart stepfamily *is* worth the effort. The Israelites discovered the Promised Land to be everything they dreamed. Not all stepfamilies have all their expectations realized, but with hard work and commitment, the rewards are worth striving for.

Promised Land Rewards

Theresa, reflecting on her family's journey through the wilderness, contributed these thoughts to my website recently (SmartStepfamilies.com), and she is right on target:

The change from being a single divorced family to a stepfamily has been very challenging . . . don't expect a miracle overnight. . . . God is always faithful in every situation and with Him as the central part of all your decisions you can make it through. It is a day-to-day process, and only putting your faith and trust in God will make things better. Having a stepfamily is very rewarding and it is worth working on!

At the heart of the stepfamily journey is the search for family identity. Knowing how to relate to one another, what to expect from yourself and the roles of others in the family—even how to introduce each other in public—are basic questions stepfamilies ask themselves repeatedly throughout their journey. And as stressful as this journey of family identity formation is, there are some rewards along the way, including:

- high-quality marital relationships
- a new marital heritage to celebrate
- a healthy family means healthier kids
- cooperation between homes results in well-disciplined children
- respect and care between stepparents and stepchildren
- multigenerational blessings in later-life stepfamilies

- experiencing love, extending grace
- redemption of your family story

High-Quality Marital Relationships

Research of couples in stepfamilies—conducted by internationally recognized marriage and family researcher Dr. David Olson, president of Life Innovations, and me—confirms that couples in stepfamilies can create high-quality marital relationships. In our book *The Remarriage Checkup*, we detail the qualities of high-quality stepfamily marriages and reveal how couples can deepen their intimacy and gain relationship strength. Qualities like effective communication, the ability to resolve conflict well, a relational style that is flexible and adaptable, enjoying leisure activities together, and couple spirituality prove to be very predictive of a high-quality marital relationship.

In other words, couples can create mutually satisfying, intimate, God-honoring marriages within stepfamilies. Undoubtedly there are a number of unique barriers to overcome (see chapter 5), but remarriages can be healthy relationships. Furthermore, I've observed that couples who endure the adversity of the journey frequently have a bond that is powerful enough to withstand anything. There is strength and a sense of victory after surviving what for some is a difficult journey.

How long does it take for couples to find an increase of satisfaction? E. Mavis Hetherington reports in her highly scientific book *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*² that it takes most couples five to seven years to get through the tensions of stepfamily life to the point that their stress level declines to match that of a husband and wife in a first marriage. Furthermore, surviving the tumultuous early years common to stepfamily living seems to give couples a staying power that keeps them going . . . and growing. There is a honeymoon for couples in stepfamilies, but keep in mind, it comes at the end of the journey and not at the beginning.

A New Marital Heritage to Celebrate

A strong stepfamily marriage is critical for the relational development of the children. Stepfamily children, especially those who have lived

through a parental divorce, need to witness and learn from a healthy marital relationship. This counteracts the negative and destructive patterns of interaction they witnessed in their parent's previous marriage (and since the divorce). Instead of arguments filled with yelling and personal agendas, they watch two people who maintain a win-win attitude negotiate the best solution for their family. Instead of a distant relationship between two people living parallel lives, they witness two people giving time and attention to their relationship. Instead of an unbalanced relationship, where one spouse is constantly chasing an ever-distancing, never-available spouse, children see a husband and wife who continually seek to sacrifice for the other out of love. On the other hand, if children witness repeated marital breakups, the net effect is a weakening of the child's sense of permanency to marriage and an increased lack of trust in the people they love.³

It's worth mentioning that many children do not welcome their parent's remarriage, especially in the beginning. They may even be antagonistic toward the stepparent's efforts to join the family. This is normal, as children hold on to the dream that their biological parents will remarry. Despite the children's resistance, a strong stepfamily couple will have positive benefits for them over time. The key is to remember that during the early integration years, children may resent the stepparent's presence in the home. Maintain a long-term perspective and live as if a healthy marriage is just what the kids desire. Someday they may come to appreciate, even celebrate, your marital commitment.

Some time ago a woman sent me an anniversary card she received from her stepdaughter. Debbie had kept the card because it meant so much to her. It made her realize just how much her stepdaughter was watching and learning from her marriage. Nearly a decade into her remarriage, Debbie received the card, which read, "Glad to see you two still haven't lost the magic. Happy anniversary, Mom and Dad!" The handwritten note inside the card was even more encouraging: "Happy Anniversary! I just wanted to thank you for the wonderful Christian example of how a marriage should work. The way you solve conflict with humor is fun to watch. When the time comes for the Lord to bless me with a mate, I hope I am as lucky as the two of you are! I love you both, Kara."

Now, that's what I call a Promised Land reward!

A Healthy Family Means Healthier Kids

In 1998 James Bray published research culminating the first ten-year longitudinal study of stepfamilies in America. His research revealed that a loving, well-functioning stepfamily over time can negate many of the detrimental psychological impacts of divorce on children. While not all of the negative effects can be reversed, it is certainly a message of hope for parents and children. It seems that with time, healthy stepfamilies can have benefits that counteract the negative costs of divorce.

Bray says, “A strong, stable stepfamily is as capable of nurturing healthy development as a nuclear family. It can imbue values, affirm limits and boundaries, and provide a structure in which rules for living a moral and productive life are made, transmitted, tested, rebelled against, and ultimately affirmed.”⁴ The key here is a “strong, stable stepfamily” which, of course, takes time and effort, but brings many blessings to children.

Recent research, for example, suggests that a healthy stepfamily can help to diminish behavioral problems in children that arise after parental divorce. Parental divorce occurring when children are in preschool (age five or younger) predicts an increase in behavioral problems throughout preschool and even into mid-childhood (ages six to ten). However, the transition into a married blended family before children reach age ten appears to have a calming effect on child behavioral issues. What’s more, a child’s residual negative behavior seems to be more related to the original divorce than the new stepfamily.⁵

But there’s even more good news. The benefits to children from healthy stepfamilies carry over to their adult years and positively impact their marital choices. It appears they have a lower divorce rate (compared to other children of divorce), and the quality of their own marriages more closely mirrors the stepfamily’s healthy marriage than the poor-quality marriage that ended in divorce.⁶ In other words, a strong stepcouple begins to undo the generational cycle of divorce—in just one generation! This is great news for parents, their children, and society at large.

Stopping the Cycle of Divorce

A high-quality stepfamily marriage provides a positive role model for children and may mitigate the effects of observing a low-quality parental marriage that ended in divorce.

Cooperation Between Homes Results in Well-Disciplined Children

When children grow up in a stable stepfamily home, they benefit tremendously. When co-parents (birth parents, separated by divorce) cooperate, the benefits are even more profound. It doesn't happen often, but some co-parents, like Jason and Leigh, have learned not to let their marital differences and past conflicts keep them from cooperating when it comes to the discipline of their children. For a long time Samuel (age nine) and Wesley (age six) told Jason, their dad, one story and Leigh, their mom, another to get out of school responsibilities. When Jason and Leigh realized what the kids were doing, they buckled down on the boys with the school's help. When Samuel and Wesley figured out that they couldn't play one parent off the other, their misbehavior at school diminished significantly. Gaining this level of cooperation is not easy for most, but seeing the rewards in well-disciplined children makes it worth the effort. I will spend concerted time in chapter 6 discussing how co-parents can cooperate for their children's well-being.

Respect and Care Between Stepparents and Stepchildren

Over time, stepparents and stepchildren can develop a tremendous bond with one another. The pace of this developing relationship varies (see chapter 7), and some will never be more than respectful friends (especially if the children are adults at the time of the marriage). But for most, a basic sense of mutual respect and care for one another is genuinely attained. Others will develop a deep, loving, and trusting bond that is very special.

Multi-Generational Blessings in Later-Life Stepfamilies

Many couples marrying later in life mistakenly assume that because their children are adults, their transition to a stable intergenerational stepfamily will be smooth. As with younger stepfamilies, later-life marriages bring many emotional transitions for adult stepchildren. Initial fears that grandchildren will not be prioritized, feelings of abandonment, renewed grief over a changing family heritage, and concerns with family inheritances and finances are common. However, these negative emotions can eventually give way to feelings of bondedness and connection, and multi-generational blessings.

A later-life couple, Bob and Vicki, and I were being interviewed for the national broadcast *FamilyLife Today*[®], when host Dennis Rainey asked Bob's adult daughter, Katie, to tell her stepmother how she felt about her. Between you and me, I gasped when Dennis asked her to share because none of us knew what she was going to say. What I did know was that there had been some struggles the first few years. Would Katie have anything positive to say? I held my breath just a little as she started to respond.

I guess Vicki already knows this because we do have such a close relationship, but right after she and Dad got married, I went through some personal stuff and she was there for me in a motherly and friend way. She talks to me like a mother, she calls me out like a mother, she loves me like a mother, and she is one of my best friends. The way that she loves my children warms my heart. . . . The things that she does behind the scenes—if you knew this woman—she's always thinking of someone else. And I just love her.⁷

I was so relieved—and so inspired that this family was experiencing multi-generational rewards. Later-life stepfamilies, like younger stepfamilies, sometimes struggle to find their fit. But the rewards are worth the effort.

Experiencing Love, Extending Grace

Learning to love again after being hurt is a fearful, risky endeavor—very risky. Extending grace is part of that risk. Without it we cannot give and receive love. God taught us this. Romans 8:12–24 reminds us that God through Christ's sacrifice has adopted believers as his children. Despite our sinfulness, his grace casts out of us a spirit of fear and replaces it with a spirit of hope. He chose to love us; he chose to extend grace to us. In so doing, he made it possible for us to experience love and grace in deeply profound ways.

I have seen this process replicated many times in stepfamilies, for example, in adults who extend to ex-spouses the grace that God has given them and stepparents who choose to love stepchildren who are cold and aloof. Imitating God's love and grace can bring about profound changes to relationships. The warmth of one heart eventually softens the anger of the other. I've watched children once empty due to the abandonment of their mother or father begin to bloom under the loving care of a stepparent. I've been inspired when a non-custodial mother speaks well of her children's

stepmother and insists that they respect her. Despite personal fear and risk, people in stepfamilies are choosing love and extending grace.

Redemption of Your Family Story

Is there a part of your personal life story or family story that you wish you could change? At this point does the tragedy in your story seem to define you? And what of the choices you made in the past that you now regret—those can't be changed; they haunt you. What can you do about the legacy of shame they have created?

In his insightful book *A Grace Revealed: How God Redeems the Story of Your Life*, author Jerry Sittser suggests that each of us is living a story. As Christians our story is being caught up into God's story (even if we're not aware of it), specifically, the story of his redemption of those who call upon his grace. It doesn't really matter that you can't change the past. What matters is that God is changing the trajectory of it. For example, the worthless, nonsensical parts of life can find purpose, and our tragedies can become service to others (remember Joseph, sold by his brothers into slavery, became the one who saved the Hebrew nation and his family from famine).

Nan and I have most certainly experienced this. Just four years after the loss of our son, our journey to find his legacy resulted in the completion of a giant Lego-like art center in Ghana, West Africa, that provides therapeutic support and healing through creative expression to rescued child slaves. It's an amazing story (stunning even still to me) that includes the collective energy of five former designers and two carpenters from ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, hundreds of volunteers and donors, and the healing care of two parents, Pam and Randy Cope, who themselves lost a child and in his memory established the Touch A Life Foundation. The Copes reached out to us after our son died just as they reach out to trafficked children and rescued us from drowning in our sadness.

The Connor Creative Art Center is helping to redeem the stories of children from tragic circumstances—and at the same time it's redeeming our family story. Does this beauty from our ashes bury our ashes? Absolutely not. I tell people all the time I will live with my suffering every day for the rest of my life. But that's not all I have. Right beside my pain is my faith; it doesn't cancel my pain, but it does inform it. My faith calms my pain, provides perspective to it, and reminds it that this life is not all there is.

Because God is redeeming all things, he will make Connor—and me—new someday and then I'll see him again. Where would I be if I weren't allowing God to wrap my story up into his bigger story of redemption? I'll tell you: telling a sad story of loss without any hope.

And what of your story? Does the story you tell of your past include any perspective of a redemptive present? What if remarriage and this new family is the present-day portion of God's redemptive work in your life? When you seek to demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit, you partner with God's activity to move your family story out of the past and into a redemptive present. And here's the amazing outcome of the far-reaching power of God's redemption—when God works all things for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28) it doesn't change the past, but it does change the story we tell about the past. When light is directed on the dark, it casts the dark in a new light. It changes our understanding of it, our interpretation, the meaning we give it, our role in the story, the outcome we see for our lives, even how we live in the present in light of the past. The past is, therefore, redeemed.

Your family story, even the part that is embedded in the past, is not over. You are in process—God's redeeming process. When you walk with him in faith, your story, even the worst parts of it, is caught up into what he is doing to redeem all things to him. There are more chapters to your family story yet to be written, some in this generation and some in the generations to come. Walk in faith and watch in awe how God authors a new legacy.

Noticing What God Has Done

During the journey to the Promised Land, the Israelites experienced many periods of doubt; perhaps you have too. I hope, when they stopped to look back at how far they had come, they could see the hand of God and how many times he had acted on their behalf. Perhaps you haven't looked back recently. Perhaps the barriers that stand in front of you now are fueling doubt and pessimism. Take a few minutes to notice what God has done to help you navigate your journey so far. In what ways has his Word provided insight for decisions and encouragement? How has trusting in his truths about marital fidelity, kindness toward your enemies, and having a servant's heart helped you and your family to overcome obstacles along the way? Make a list of his faithfulness and thank him for it.

Ritu Ghatourey said, “You must never forget who was there for you when no one else was.” Noticing what God has done for us sometimes includes realizing that the very family members with whom we struggle are also the ones who have been there when others weren’t. Seeing one another as a gift—yes, sometimes a frustrating gift—moves your heart in the direction of gratitude. When that gratitude is experienced by family members, their heart can’t help but be softened a little, and they move closer to you—and everyone together moves a little closer toward God.

Is there a Promised Land for stepfamilies who don’t quit, who faithfully follow their Lord, and who learn all they can about navigating the journey? Absolutely. And it’s well worth the effort!

Questions for Discussion

To help you apply what you are learning, each chapter concludes with questions for parents and children, pre-stepfamily dating or engaged couples, and all couples (appropriate for all couples, whether dating or married). I suggest you work through the questions on your own before discussing them with your kids, dating partner, or spouse. Not all of the questions are appropriate for children or stepchildren, so before talking with them, consider their ages and your overall relationship with them.

Recommended resources for further discussion:

- *Life in a Blender* by Ron L. Deal—this booklet for children ages ten and up brings perspective and practical guidance to children in stepfamilies. The accompanying *Parent Discussion Guide* helps you engage your children in insightful conversation about what they’ve read. Available at FamilyLife.com.
- *The Smart Stepfamily DVD Small-Group Resource* by Ron L. Deal—an eight-week video curriculum for small groups or personal study. Available online and in bookstores.

■ **FOR PARENT-CHILD DISCUSSION** (Discretion based on the age of the child and the quality of adult-child relationships is advised.)

1. Begin by briefly telling your child the story of God’s rescue of the Israelites from the hand of Pharaoh (their age will dictate how much detail you share). Then say, “Our family is kind of like that story.

We are traveling together as a new family, and some days it's difficult to know where we are going or how to get there. Other days we are doing well. But every day we have to trust God to lead us through the wilderness.”

2. What part of this story can you relate to?
3. What joys (or rewards) have you already experienced?
4. What questions do you have for me about our family and our journey?

■ FOR ALL COUPLES

1. What aspects of your past did you hope marriage would “cure”?
2. Which of the following emotions have you felt in the past? Which still haunt you from time to time? Anger. Bitterness. Depression. Sadness. Longing. Hurt. Resentment. Guilt. Fear. Pain. Rejection.
3. In what ways have you experienced disillusionment in your step-relationships and at what point did you realize things weren't working out as you had expected? How have you adjusted your expectations?
4. In what ways was your remarriage another loss for your children? How can you be sensitive to that loss without being guilt-ridden (or easily manipulated because you feel guilty)?
5. Look again at the list of uncharted waters (under Facing a Sea of Opposition) early in this chapter. Which of these represent areas of growth for you or your stepfamily? What areas do you consider to be the priority growth areas right now?
6. In what ways have you or your stepfamily members experienced God's leading or his healing hand? Be sure to share with your stepfamily how you see him at work in your lives.
7. What Scriptures have been helpful or inspiring to you recently? If you haven't been reading your Bible much lately, how can you begin to do so again?
8. Share a time with your spouse when you weren't sure the work was worth the effort. If that time is now, what do you need to help you stay determined? If you trusted God to bring you through, what would you be doing differently than you are now to work in that direction?
9. Which, if any, of the Promised Land Payoffs have you experienced to some degree already?

- High-quality marital relationships
 - A new marital heritage to celebrate
 - A healthy family means healthier kids
 - Cooperation between homes results in well-disciplined children
 - Respect and care between stepparents and stepchildren
 - Multi-generational blessings in later-life stepfamilies
 - Experiencing love, extending grace
 - Redemption of your family story
10. To give and receive support for your journey, I recommend that you create or join a stepfamily small group. Is one available in your church? If not, go to Familylife.com/blended to search for a ministry in your area or find resources to start your own group.

■ **CASE STUDY IN STEPFAMILY FEARS**

Read again the fears from the Thomas family at the beginning of this chapter, and then answer the following questions.

1. Which fears of the biological and/or stepparent can you relate to and why?
2. What are you doing to prevent these fears from becoming a reality?
3. Think through your previous losses and painful family experiences (either family of origin or first marriage). How do your current fears connect with those experiences? How have they sensitized you to avoiding more pain in current relationships?
4. If you weren't hamstrung by the past, how would you be different in the present?
5. Consider the fears mentioned by the children. Which might your children also feel?

■ **FOR PRE-STEPFAMILY COUPLES**

1. In what ways do you feel intimidated and frightened after reading this chapter?
2. What challenges are you beginning to see that you had not thought about before?

3. Think of a stepfamily couple that you can interview. Ask them the following questions. If possible, start attending a stepfamily support group to help you make a more informed decision about marriage.
- What do you wish you had known before you married?
 - What are your three greatest challenges?
 - How could you have better prepared yourselves for stepfamily living?
 - What painful emotions from the past did you not resolve prior to marriage?
 - How long have you been traveling this journey?
 - What blessings have you experienced and at what price?