Faith & Family

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The Heart of Family Reformation

by **JIM ELLIFF**

When our children were younger, we began the day with the hymn we are currently memorizing. When Laura was five, she sang for all of us the second verse of "I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord" by the Yale president of the late 1700s, Timothy Dwight. With a determined look, she sang out,

I love Thy church, O God.
Her walls before Thee stand.
Dear as the apple of Thine eye,
And gravy on Thy hand.

My boys collapsed on the floor with laughter. The word is "graven!"

I value family worship, not only because it is sometimes humorous, but because it is glue that holds families together, stimulus for some of the family's best discussions, and provides real strength for family members' lives—it can become the heart, in fact, of family reformation.

The Puritans, long misunderstood, had an exceptional view of the family. We can learn from them even though we might not accept all they had to say. They often talked of the home as the "little church," and the father as the pastor of his little flock. Lewis Bayly said, "What the preacher is in the pulpit, the same the Christian householder is in his house." Family worship is the natural outcome of such a view. In homes without a believing father, the mother may fulfill this oversight role for children.

The practice of family worship (with or without children at home) is as forgotten to the church today as the dust in our attic, but this simple and effective method of restoring family spirituality is the most potent tool we have available to us—and every one of us can do it!

WHY IS FAMILY WORSHIP CRITICAL?

First, family worship is critical because the placing of the Word of God in the hearts of our family members is indispensable to their conversion.

Paul reminded Timothy that, "From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

Peter said that we are "born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible through the Word of God which lives and abides forever" (1 Pet. 1:23). This incorruptible seed of saving life (corresponding to the natural biological seed) is inseminated in the dead soul via the Word of God alone.

The Puritans believed this with a passion. This was the rationale for their long sermons, the catechizing of children, the morning messages in those cold church buildings prior to the work day, the daily meditating on the Word in private, and especially the practice of family worship. For the Puritan, family worship took place two times a day, as the "morning and evening sacrifice." It was through this means that his children and wife, and any other guests or helpers in the home, might receive life!

Richard Baxter, one of the most famous of the Puritans, saw his village of Kidderminster, England, transformed through this method. He stated:

I do verily believe that if parents did their duty as they ought, the Word publicly preached would not be the ordinary means of regeneration in the church, but only without the church, among practical heathens and infidels.

Second, it is critical because the Word alone enables your family to withstand the prevailing currents of an evil culture.

In the 2 Timothy 3 passage, we find a torrent of base culture descending on young Timothy. ". . .In the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers… disobedient to parents…without self-control. . .headstrong. . .lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (vss.1-4).

How will you be able to rescue your family from the effects of such a culture? Only through the Word of God, according to Paul. The Word makes Timothy as the "man of God," "thoroughly equipped for every good work" necessary to strengthen the church. His toolbox is complete and "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (vs.16) so that the people under his charge can withstand the flood of culture described in the previous verses.

In the same way, the shepherding father of the home (or the mother in homes without a father, which was Timothy's situation) is made adequate to help his or her family. Paul tells Timothy, therefore, to "preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season" (4:2).

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth… (4:3-4).

When culture rushes down on your family and the professing church is trying to imitate the world itself, how will your family keep from being swept away in its path? Only through the Word of God! Family worship, on a daily basis, is your hope that they will stand like steel piers against the prevailing tide.

When speaking in Basel, Switzerland, years ago I saw a ferry which crossed the swift Rhone River. It had no engine but operated by means of its resistance to the current, guided from one side to the other along a taut steel line. Unless we attach those tender hearts of our family members to the steel line of truth, there will be little hope of their withstanding

the forces pressing against them.

In India, there was a custom of throwing babies into the Ganges River as a sacrifice to the gods. If we are unwilling to do any more than merely take our children to church, we might as well be throwing them into the river of the culture. This is an explanation why many children of Christian parents are so often no different than the world's. They have been given to the gods by their parents—thrown in with hands of neglect.

WHAT ARE THE BASICS?

There are three aspects of family worship that I find important: singing, the reading of the Word, and prayer, or as one friend puts it, Song, Scripture, and Supplication.

Singing. Not every home is musical, but every attempt should be made to incorporate singing into the daily worship experience. We have been concerned that a whole generation of children are growing up without Christian hymnody. Therefore, we taught our children the best hymns of the faith. In fact, I used to give my children three dollars for every hymn they learned!

We preferred the hymns written by the theologians and pastors of earlier days (Watts, Wesley, Newton, Doddridge, etc.) since the theology is better. Some new authors are providing hymns and spiritual songs that are also valuable. A mixture is best. The "gospel hall songs," however, written by the crusade musicians of the 19th century are often trite and less God-exalting, even though some believers are romantically attached to them.

I got the idea of paying money for learning hymns from Charles Spurgeon, the 19th-century pastor of London's Metropolitan Tabernacle.

My grandfather was very fond of Dr. Watt's hymns, and my grandmother, wishing to get me to learn them, promised me a penny for each one that I should say to her perfectly. I found it an easy and pleasant method of earning money, and learned them so fast that grandmother said she must reduce the price to a halfpenny each, and afterwards to a farthing, if she did not mean to be quite ruined by her extravagance. There is no telling how low the amount per hymn might have sunk, but grandfather said that he was getting overrun with rats, and offered me a shilling a dozen for all I could kill. I found, at the time, that the occupation of rat-catching paid me better than learning hymns, but I know which employment has been the more permanently profitable to me. No matter on what topic I am preaching, I can even now, in the middle of any sermon, quote some verse of a hymn in harmony with the subject. The hymns have remained with me, while those old rats for years have passed away, and the shillings I earned by killing them have been spent long ago.

Reading the Word. Though there are uses for devotional books of various types, they are best as a supplement and not a substitute for the Bible. My preference was to stick with reading the Bible as our main diet during family worship. Occasionally you may wish to add a chapter day by day of a Christian biography, while still giving the Bible the center stage. Use other helps at bedtime, or as a supplement, if helpful, but drink the "pure milk of the Word" during family worship. We found that reading a chapter each day was best, and always completing the book we began.

You will find the Bible engaging enough on its own, and often a launching place for discussion about many things. For instance, what better place can you find to learn about sexuality than from Scripture? Don't be afraid of the less-than-perfect characters you will meet in the Bible. They are included for our instruction. Use the examples, good and bad, to talk about those forgotten virtues of integrity, honesty, faithfulness, etc. Bring out the nature of sin and the beauties of the gospel, heaven, and hell.

When the children are young, or the family is new to the faith, go over and over the story portions of the Bible. Begin with Mark, and then read the other gospels, Genesis, Exodus, the two Samuels, Kings and Chronicles, Ruth, Esther, Acts,

etc. This will give them the history of the Bible as a great redemption drama. Later they can handle the teaching portions better.

Though the morning is by far the best time for family worship, you may not find it workable. You may wish to take the mealtime most attended by all your family. Have the Bible set beside the father's place as part of the table setting. Then, after the meal, but before any dishes are moved off the table, worship together. Do it faithfully, even when someone must be absent.

Family Prayers. Are your children unused to seeing prayers answered? Why? It is often because we don't pray very specifically. Also, when we see the answer come in, it is important to make something of it.

I preferred to talk with the family about some of our needs and then assign each of us something to pray about. I usually accompanied this with an encouragement that God has been answering our prayers and that we all should pray silently while another is wording our request. There is nothing more beautiful than the sincere request of children.

Keeping this time fresh will be your hardest task. Sometimes you may wish to put requests into a basket and let each person draw one out. Seek ways to make this time better. When the children are young, however, family worship should not be long and tedious for them. They will learn best by degrees.

Some families will keep up the tradition of family worship throughout the family's life together. Others will find other ways to encourage the intake of the Bible and prayer as the family matures. How we do it is a matter of personal choice. God has not commanded daily family worship as I have outlined it, but He does intend for each believing member of the home to grow by means of the Bible and to pray. It is the parent's job to encourage this practice and to be the primary example for their children. When children are younger and do not understand the Bible on their own, family worship seems almost indispensable as a method.

JUDGMENT DAY

Puritan Richard Mather (1596-1669), grandfather of Increase, and great grandfather of Cotton Mather, once imagined children on judgment day, speaking to their parents. His words will serve as a final sober warning that we must be more diligent to care for the souls of our children:

All this that we here suffer is through you. You should have taught us the things of God, and did not. You should have restrained us from sin and corrected us, and you did not. You were the means of our original corruption and guiltiness, and yet you never showed any competent care that we might be delivered from it. Woe unto us that we had such carnal and careless parents; and woe unto you that had no more compassion and pity to prevent the everlasting misery of your own children.

3 Challenges to Creating a Gospel Culture in Your Family

by **MICHAEL KELLEY**

Every environment has a culture. Your workplace, a restaurant, a church—even your own home has a culture all its own. The culture of an environment is like a set of unwritten rules by which people abide while in that particular environment. It's not just about behavior—it's about how you think, how you feel, and then, of course, how you behave. It's a powerful thing.

Here's the thing, though—culture will be created with or without our help. We would be wise, then, to recognize this fact and take an active role in culture formation in our surrounding environments. We ought to consider carefully not just how we talk about the gospel, but how we take an active role in forming a gospel culture in our homes.

That is to say, can we ingrain the gospel so much in the way that we talk, think, discipline our children, or converse around the dinner table, that it's part of our very fabric of living, and not just an occasional topic of conversation? I hope so. I pray so.

Yet there are obstacles to creating this kind of culture in our families. These are obstacles that, in my view, run contrary to the nature of free grace, and obstacles of which we ought to be aware if we want to actively shape our culture in a gospel-centered way.

1. The Pressure of Activities

Boy, I feel this. There are so many opportunities for our kids. Sports, music, art—you name it. They're all there. And our kids, like most kids, want to do a bunch of them. What's more, there is a kind of pressure when you talk to other families to be involved in this activity or that one. Maybe it's even more than pressure, though—maybe there is a little fear on our part as parents that our kids will miss out on something if we say "no" to a certain activity. That inability to say no, no matter the cost, is the rub.

The pressure of these activities is an obstacle to a gospel-centered culture because we can easily, both as parents and on behalf of our children, start to measure our worth and value based on our participation in everything. That basis of

personal worth in these activities runs contrary to a gospel-infused culture of self-worth based on the love of Jesus alone.

2. The Desire to Be Popular

I thought I would have outgrown this by now. After all, I'm not in middle school anymore. But the pull is still there, just as the "right crowd" of people is still there. If it's there for us as parents, surely it's there for our kids. It's that desire to be well-liked at any cost that runs contrary to the gospel. That cost is more than we can bear. We find ourselves overscheduling, refusing to tell the truth, spending money irresponsibly, and all other kinds of things. And why?

To sit at the right proverbial lunch table.

In a gospel-centered culture, we recognize the difference between the praise of men (or of children), and the love and acceptance we only find in Jesus.

3. The Pace of the Schedule

If you have multiple kids, then you know the frenetic pace of life into which we drift. We overcommit and soon find ourselves rushing from this activity to that one, never seeing each other face to face, and even more rarely having an in-depth conversation. Time becomes the most precious of commodities, one that we're always chasing but never grasp.

The reason the pace of our schedule is an obstacle to a gospel-centered culture in our home is simple—creating a culture like this takes time. Sustained, long periods of time. We have to talk, we have to pray, we have to read, we have to cry, we have to laugh—we have to do all these things, and we have to do these things together, centered on Jesus.

When you look at these three things, you begin to see that all three are characteristics of the world in which we live. That means if we want to establish a different kind of culture in our homes, we are already walking uphill. It's going to be a fight. But it's a battle worth fighting.

Faith That Affects Our Children

by **JOEL LITTLEFIELD**

We sat our children down for lunch and told them what God was calling us to do.

"God is telling us to move back to Maine and plant a church," I said.

My wife and I have three children. Their ages are twelve, ten, and eight. That's old enough for them to be deeply affected by such a move.

The Lord called us to Tennessee from Maine, where we've been for about three years. I've been assisting my father-in-law who is the pastor of a Calvary Chapel. And now, the same One who called us here is calling us back.

Why would He do that?

Because He just does. He's been doing this sort of thing since Abram received the call to leave Ur and head out for the land which God would show him. He does this sort of thing because He's chosen to use people as the primary means to getting the message of His glory to the world. Seeing that such a thing is so basic in the narrative of Scripture, you would think more people would be aware of it, and less people would be shocked when it happens. Oh well.

So my wife and I watched the reactions of our children after hearing the news. We saw different responses from each.

My eight-year-old daughter sort of smiled and said, "God has been speaking to me. He told me that this was going to happen." She was so matter-of-fact. This is a girl we've prayed with several times specifically about how to hear from the Lord. Sure, there was sadness, too. She's our outgoing one and has captured the hearts of nearly every person in our church with her fun and charm. She's going to miss them deeply.

When she made the comment about God speaking to her, my eyes welled up with tears. The emotions came because it matters to me that my children understand the call of God. It's important to me that they understand what it is to hear from God and do whatever He tells them to do, even if it's uncomfortable.

I looked over at my ten-year-old son and he was beaming with joy. He's thinking of his cousins that he has missed greatly for the last three years. Those very cousins are the ones he cried over when we made the sacrifice to move away. He's learning that if you're going to pick up and follow Christ, it means you're always going to leave something or someone behind. But God restores and God fills in the voids over time. For the most part, his attitude over the news was one of excitement.

Then there's my eldest son. He's 12. I looked across the long table to see the struggle on his young face. I know it's all part of life, but I hate seeing that young man cry that way. Not because he's supposed to be more manly or something. Even Jesus wept. I hate it because I'm his father and desire good for him. His age and personality have made it easier to make close friends in the short time we've been here—friends he's really enjoyed spending time with. And when you have to leave people like that, it really hurts.

Both my wife and I gave him a shoulder to cry on. Then, my daughter came over and helped to comfort. My ten-year-old watched, showing his emotions a bit differently than the rest. I prayed over us all.

These are the moments I want my kids to remember when they are older. I want them to have the balance of a life filled with challenges and the kind of pain that shapes us into better people for Christ. I want them to see and experience a family that feels those pains together and parents who teach them that serving Jesus is a constant dying to self. I want them to understand that the gospel of Jesus and the spread of that message is the most important thing on earth. If we, as parents, do not teach this, we are going to create a next generation that knows nothing of sacrifice and service, but is always seeking the easiest road. But easy roads reap small fruit and little reward.

A few days later, my eldest came to me and said, "Dad, I think I'm doing better now with the idea of moving."

I asked, "Why's that?"

He answered, "Because I see the importance of spreading the gospel and making disciples. And I want to be good at that too. I just don't know how."

"Well, I intend to teach you and show you what that looks like," I told him.

You see, God is faithful. I want to encourage any parents reading to speak openly about the kingdom, the gospel, and the mission at hand with your children. Pray with them often and do not doubt God's ability and desire to make them into vessels for His glory. If all your conversations are about video games and toys, and they lack gospel depth—no seeds of kingdom living and faith being planted into their hearts—what will they truly learn about what it means to be a Christian? They'll be prone to weakness and will be unprepared for hardship and challenges. Be the kind of family who serves Christ together, prays together, speaks openly of struggles, and knows that the best help is a relationship with Jesus Christ.

If you sense God is calling you to make a move or to step out in faith, or even if you do not sense that at all, seek to be the kind of parents who live your life of faith on display for your children to see. Your example, good or bad, is always shaping them.

Discerning Your Child's Spiritual State

by **MIKE PHAY**

As you speak with your child about Jesus, God's Word, and their relationship with God, there are several biblical values that should frame your approach to this ongoing conversation. Oftentimes, parents are intimidated to have spiritual conversations with their children simply because they doubt their own competence. They fear that they will get it wrong. Christian parents often tend to take the minimalist route, which is easy and requires no college degree: Let's just get our child to "pray the prayer" to "accept Jesus into their heart." That done: success! My child's eternal destiny is secure, and we can return to life as normal. But God has called and equipped Christian parents for something more.

This simplistic approach with your child is missing the deep importance of the parent/child relationship: God has given you to your child as a leader, mentor, teacher, and disciple-maker. These kinds of everyday spiritual conversations should be a part of your life rhythm with your child. As God commanded the Israelite parents in regard to His commandments: "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." (Deuteronomy 6:7)

The following are some biblical values and guidelines that may be helpful in the discerning work of guiding your children to Jesus, especially around the key moments of conversion and baptism.

Guiding Biblical Values

Curiosity and eagerness do not necessarily equate to spiritual life. Children are insatiably curious learners. Childhood is an imaginative and creative time. It is also a stage of life when motivation comes through reward and punishment. For these reasons, words and reality do not always align for children. This causes difficulty in our discernment of the heart of our children. Children will tend to say what they think you want to hear, including the ubiquitous "sinner's prayer." For example, my 4-year-old daughter will dutifully (and joyously!) declare, "Jesus died on the cross for our sins!" as a response to any question asked when the Bible is open at our dinner table. She can enthusiastically parrot the correct response to the wrong question: as parents, we encourage and correct with gentle guidance, because she is eager, curious and learning. Eagerness and curiosity are the happy marks of healthy children everywhere; they are not necessarily trustworthy markers of spiritual life.

God's Word must be central in your conversations with your child. God has sovereignly designed that faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:14-17). You can have many spiritually-oriented and deep conversations with your children without ever bringing God's Word to bear. But the response that you are looking for in your child's heart is not a response to your wisdom, but to God's Word. Keep the Bible open and in front of you. The fruit that you and your child will reap from these types of Word-centered conversations will be eternal.

Be prayerfully attentive to God's work in your child's heart. Parents should take comfort in the fact that the primary work of salvation in a child's heart is the work of God. The nature of new birth is God's sovereign election of individuals (John 15:16; Ephesians 1:4; Acts 13:48; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; Revelation 17:8), brought to fruition through the Spirit's movement and work in a dead heart (John 3:8; Ezekiel 37; Acts 2:39; John 10; Ephesians 2:1-10). For parents, there is a call to prayerful and dependent attentiveness in looking for signs of the Spirit's movements in a child's heart. God has been at work in your child well before you were even on the scene (Psalm 139:13-16; Ephesians 1:3-6). Be on the hunt for His grace in the heart and life of your child.

Call for but do not force a response. Do not be afraid to call your child to profess faith or to follow Jesus in baptism if you believe that your child is ready. Conversely, do not be afraid to have your child wait if they are not ready. Allowing a child to respond to God in His time is more important than your own (possibly idolatrous) need for assurance that your child is on the right track. You must be careful that your eagerness does not overcome a child's readiness. Seek to carefully and sensitively take a posture of responsiveness to the movement of the Spirit rather than one of forceful initiation, as you patiently allow the Spirit to work faith in your child rather than inadvertently lead your child to a place where God is not leading. Discernment and relationship are key. There are several "Discernment Helps" lined out below. If one or several of these are lacking—or even more strongly, a child is resistant to the Gospel or to outward proclamation—then wisdom would caution against any pressure to reap where a crop is unprepared for harvest.

Take into account both the mind and the heart. It is important that your child understand the truth of the Gospel and be able to articulate it in their own words. Nevertheless, this articulation is not enough, as the responses that you are looking for in your child must be both intellectual (mind) and emotional (heart). See below for more clarity on the affectional response of faith.

Discernment Helps

The Bible clarifies for us how the Spirit moves in people and how a true response of faith will be flavored. Below are some tips that are helpful in a parent's work of discerning their child's heart in relation to the look and feel of biblical conversion and faith in Christ. Stay attentive to the Spirit moving in your child's heart in response to the Word of God in the following ways:

Gospel Sorrow: Have you seen or discerned in your child a sorrow for and brokenness over their sin? There is a point in the life of every true believer when they recognize sin not just as an idea, but as a personal affront against a holy God. Gospel fear drives an individual to repentance and a desire for forgiveness. With children, this will most often be perceived as a brokenness for their sin(s), articulated in their own words, and often accompanied with tears. This is good and healthy as children are confronted with their own sinfulness. The opposite of Gospel Sorrow is any response such as defensiveness, blame, deflection, or anger when personal sin is confronted or opposed. (Psalm 51:17; Matthew 5:3; 2 Corinthians 7:10)

Affection for Christ: The Gospel calls us to a love and devotion for Christ that are over and above all other loves and devotions (Exodus 20:3; Matthew 22:37-38). This is opposed to several possible responses that we might see in our children, including a mere intellectual assent to truth, or a reward/punishment response (fear of Hell, desire to please, etc.). A reverent fear of God is right and good (Proverbs 1:7; Psalm 19:9; 1 Peter 2:17). Thankfully, the Gospel takes us through a simplistic fear to a deep love and sincere affection for Christ, the object of our faith (1 John 4:18). Parents should be looking for affectional clues in their children, giving evidence to their love for Christ. This may sound like

delight, love, satisfaction, or longing.

Discernible Fruit: Good fruit is the outward, discernible result of true, biblical faith (Matthew 3:8; 7:16-20; John 15:3-5,8,16; Romans 7:4; Galatians 5:22-23; Philippians 1:9-11; James 2:14-26). When considering fruit, we begin to take note of a child's behavior, which can be tricky. Although all children are born sinners, some are naturally more obedient than others. This may be the result of the regenerating work of the Spirit in the child, common grace given through a pleasant or gentle disposition, or a heightened desire to please. Another issue with discerning fruit in children is a lack of time or life experience, especially with very young children. Even if regeneration, repentance, and faith have taken place, they have simply not had enough life duration to "prove it" through the fruit of faith. A further complication arises in the fact that as children grow, they often "naturally" overcome or grow out of certain behaviors. In other words, they mature. Thankfully, parents usually know their children best and through time and prayerful attention can often discern the difference between merely good behavior and the true fruit of repentance.

Guiding Questions

The following are several questions to help guide conversation as you (1) discern your child's heart of faith, and (2) help your child tell their story (testimony) of God's grace in their lives.

1. When did you realize that you needed a Savior? [Acts 2:37-38; Romans 3:23; 6:23; 1 John 1:8-9]

2. What do you believe God did for you to forgive your sins and give you eternal life? [John 3:16; Romans 5:6-11; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; 2 Corinthians 5:21]

3. What does Jesus mean to you? [This is the affectional, heart question: Psalm 36:7-9; 37:4; 63:1-8; 73:23-26; Philippians 3:7-11]

4. What does it mean for you to put your faith in Christ? [Matthew 26:28; Acts 2:37-38; 10:43; Galatians 2:17-21; 3:22; Colossians 1:13-14. [Note: With this question, you are attempting to help your child articulate their trust in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of their sins and for the fulfillment of all His promises to them, including eternal life.]

5. How do you intend to live out your faith in Christ? [Matthew 28:18-20; John 14:15,21; 15:10; Romans 6:17-18; James 2:14-26; 1 Peter 1:13-16. [Note: With this question, you are attempting to help your child articulate their intention—with God's gracious help—to obey Jesus' teachings and to follow Him as both Lord and King.]

Tucking Them In

by **BECKY WILSON**

I probably shouldn't continue to give further and further evidence of my oddities, of which there are plenty for sure. But I suppose I would have very little to say if I only mentioned my more "normal" moments, so there's that. Here's today's weirdness: I realized recently that I have a little bit of a strange obsession with tucking my kids in at night.

"Well, that's not that weird," you may think. No, for real. It's weird. Because for some reason, I can't just do it once and be done with it. First, I go and tuck them in as soon as they're ready for bed. You know the drill: Make sure the doors and windows are locked. Make sure they have enough blankets. Turn the big lights off and the little lights on. Pray. Hugs. Smooches on all 4 cheeks and 2 foreheads. That sort of thing. And then as I'm walking out the bedroom door to close it behind me, we try to see who can be the last one to say "I Love You." (Macy always yells it one last time after the door is closed, which I treasure more than she knows.) At this point, the girls are all set. They're happy and cozy and likely to drift off to peaceful sleep in just a few minutes. I literally do this every single night we're in the same house together. I can't sleep if I don't.

After this, my husband and I usually stay up for at least a couple more hours. (Okay, who am I kidding? More like 4 or 5. Who needs sleep anyway?) But no matter how long the girls have already been peacefully sleeping, I can't go to sleep myself until I have gone one more time into their room for that last little "tuck in" and prayer before I lay down my own head.

I wonder how much longer they'll let me do this. They're 10 and 12! It's not like they can't put themselves to bed. But I'm finding these days that tucking them in has much more to do with securing the edges of life than the edges of blankets. It's about hemming in those flailing moments of uncertainty with solid places to land and rest from time to time.

This is easier said than done, to be sure. But maybe that's why I'm so adamant about taking every chance I possibly can to get it right. One more prayer that I'll say the right things when the hard stuff comes. One more hug and kiss and smile to help them understand how much I love them. One more moment of giggling together. One more opportunity to build trust just by "being there" with them. One more chance to do something right in raising them. One more chance. I always need one more chance. Thank God it comes every day.

I wrestle with the tangle of paths they face—we face—each day. I can't hem them in completely. I know this. But surely I am responsible for building hedges of safety. I can help re-route around dangerous areas. I can illuminate the dark corners and shed light on areas where they insist on further investigation, all the while allowing them to form their own identities and learn to embrace truth for themselves.

Shudder. Can I really do this? Let them make their own decisions? Let them investigate the scary stuff? Let them learn a few things the hard way?

This is terrifying! I can't do it. I can't. At least not without the promises of a sovereign God, who loves them more than I ever could.

And so, what I think I'm learning through all of this is that the reason I crave that last little moment in my day so much—one last prayer over my sweet girls and maybe one more little "tuck"—is that it's in this moment that God tucks in the edges of my heart.

Do y'all know these edges? The ones that are flayed open to be destroyed by the tiniest thought of any harm that might come to your children? I don't even mean the really bad stuff. It could be as simple as worrying that someone might hurt their feelings tomorrow. Does that thought have the power to destroy the edges of your heart? It does mine. I need those edges tucked in. Every single night. By my Comforter and my Keeper and certainly the Keeper of my children as well.

Thank you, Lord, for loving them better than I ever will! And thank you for securing my heart every night as I secure blankets. Maybe my girls won't outgrow their need to be tucked in. It doesn't seem their mother has.