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How I Became a Father

Looking back over my childhood and early life, I am surprised to find myself writing this book. Very little in that period would seem to qualify me for such a task!

I was born into a British military family, with no brothers or sisters. Every male relative I have ever known has been an officer in the British Army. At the age of nine, suitably attired in a tweed suit and bowler hat, I was sent off to a prep school. From there I went on to Eton, and from there to King's College, Cambridge. For fifteen years I attended various boarding schools, never spending more than three months of any year at home. After five years at Cambridge I wrote a thesis, "The Evolution of Plato's Method of Definition," and was elected to a Fellowship at King's College.

During all the years of my education, I never had a female teacher. At Cambridge I had a few girlfriends, but the inner workings of the female personality remained a mystery to me—a mystery I was not particularly interested in trying to solve!

What promised to be an uneventful career in the rarefied atmosphere of a major university was rudely interrupted by World War II. When my call up to the forces came, I chose a noncombatant role in the British Royal Army Medical Corps. In the Army I decided to continue my academic career by studying the Bible, which I approached purely as a work of philosophy. I found it hard to understand in many places, but determined to read it all the way through from Genesis to Revelation. Then I would be in a position to pronounce an authoritative judgment on it.

After about nine months, somewhere in the book of Job, I had an unexpected encounter with the Bible's author, who revealed Himself to me through the Person of Jesus Christ. That encounter changed the course of my life radically and permanently. After all, I recalled that Plato himself had acknowledged, "We have no

word from God,” whereas the Bible plainly claimed that it was just that—“the Word of God.” The more I studied it and applied it in my daily life, the more convinced I became that its claim was true. It really was God’s revelation of Himself to man.

Shortly afterward the Army sent me to the Middle East. After three years in the deserts of Egypt, Libya and the Sudan, I was posted to Jerusalem. There I met and married a Danish schoolteacher, Lydia Christensen. Lydia had been enjoying a successful career as a teacher in the state school system of Denmark when God directed her to leave everything behind and go to Jerusalem. There she opened a faith home for children without parents.

When Lydia and I were married, she brought with her eight girls without parents to whom she had become an adoptive mother, and for whom, from that time onward, I accepted the responsibility of fatherhood. Of these girls, six were Jewish, one was Arab and one was English. They ranged in age from eighteen to three.

From my background as a boy without brothers or sisters, I suddenly found myself the only male responsible for ten females—Lydia, her eight girls and one Arab maid, Jameela. In our new relationship we all had many adjustments to make. There were times when I felt that the responsibility I had taken on was too great. Undoubtedly Lydia, too, must have wondered sometimes whether she had made the right decision in marrying me. But somehow the love and grace of God always carried us through.

In addition to these adjustments in our relationships, Lydia and I faced many external pressures. In the first two years of our marriage, we were caught up in the fighting that brought the State of Israel into being. Twice during that time, in order to save our lives, we had to flee from our home in the middle of the night. We were never able to return to either home.

At one point the four older girls were separated from us, but God kept His hand on us and brought us all together again in England as a united family.

Later, after all but the two youngest girls had grown up, Lydia and I spent five years in Kenya, where I served as principal of a training college for African teachers.

During this period we adopted a ninth child, an African baby girl. Her mother had died giving birth and the baby had been found abandoned on the mud floor of an African hut.

Three years after Lydia was called home to the Lord, I married my second wife, Ruth. We were married for twenty years, until Ruth in her turn was called home. Ruth added to our union three more adopted children, all of whom are Jewish. So now I stand in the relationship of father to exactly a dozen persons!

Ruth's warm, outgoing personality quickly endeared her to the other members of my family. She also contributed special administrative and editorial skills, which wonderfully complemented my own ministry as a Bible teacher. In the twenty years we were married, my ministry expanded in ways I would never have dreamed of. Through the combined channels of printed books, audiotapes, videotapes, radio and television broadcasting, my Bible teaching has reached into all the continents, even including Antarctica. My office staff tell me that we are now sending our material to every nation to which the U.S. Postal Service delivers, and that portions of my material have been translated into sixty foreign languages.

Our family continues to grow at a rate that is difficult to keep up with. Including additions by marriages and births, the combined family presently numbers about 150 persons! We now have family members residing in many different countries: Israel, Britain, Canada, the United States and Australia. With so large a family so widely scattered, it is not possible for us all to keep in as close contact with each other as we would wish. Nevertheless we still do have the feeling that we are one family.

I have not been a perfect husband or father, by any means. But my family life on the whole has been happy and successful, for which I give God all the glory. Through it I have learned many lessons, which I believe God wants me to share in this book.

I look back to a period in my ministry, however, when I came perilously close to missing God's plan for my marriage and my family. At the time I was traveling continually from meeting to meeting and conference to conference, preaching to

large crowds and finding a good response from the people. One evening at a conference I heard another speaker make this remark: “The expert is the man away from home with a briefcase.”

Those words struck my heart like an arrow.

That really describes me, I thought to myself. I’m a man away from home with a briefcase. Everybody regards me as an expert. But in actual fact, what’s happening in my home?

God challenged me in an altogether new way that I had to succeed, first and foremost, as a husband and father before I could succeed in any other capacity.

So I began to analyze my own motives. Why did I spend so much time traveling? Why was I so stimulated by appearing in all those meetings? Gradually I recognized in my motives a strong element of personal ambition. I enjoyed standing on the platform in front of a large audience. I basked in my reputation as an “anointed” speaker.

Looking back over my years in public ministry, I recognized that I was more concerned at times about my reputation as a preacher than about some of Lydia’s personal and emotional needs. Sometimes I was more concerned about my success as a minister than about the well-being of my family.

By the mercy of God no serious crisis erupted in our home. In fact, my family at times were more loyal to me than I deserved. Today I thank God continually for all of them! I have gradually come to see, however, that personal ambition at the expense of home life is a serious problem in the lives of many men. Some would be considered successful and would consider themselves successful. Yet an inner core of self-centeredness keeps them from the warm, open interchange with their families that is the essence of successful relationships within a home.

There may be no open crisis or thought of the marriage breaking up. Yet the home provides none of the security and fulfillment that the family members need. In many cases the father has so many commitments outside his home that he is not even aware that he is failing his family.

I have come to the conclusion that many men in our contemporary culture need to face this issue. They may be successful in various fields—as bank presidents or doctors or lawyers or computer technicians or on the golf course. They may even be successful in Christian ministry. Yet they are failures in their own homes.

I want to suggest to you that to succeed in other capacities and to fail as a husband or father is, in God's sight, to fail. No other success can make up for that failure.

I have said many times that the number-one problem in society today is delinquent males—men who have failed in their two primary responsibilities: as husbands and as fathers.

You can read various books about the family, but you cannot build a truly successful family until you understand these two basic roles: husband and father. They are the essential foundation on which a truly happy and harmonious home can be built.

It is my purpose in this book to show you in simple, practical terms what it takes to be a successful husband and a successful father. From there you can go on to achieve true success in any one of many different areas. But above all you will be a blessing to those closest to you—your wife and your children.