Timeless Principles for Leading Your Family

Straight Talk to MEN

Dr. James Dobson

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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## Contents

### A Man Looks Back
1. A Man Looks Back ................................................. 8  
2. A Man and His Sexual Identity ................................. 29  

### What Is a Man?
3. My Father ............................................................ 48  
4. The Revelation ...................................................... 55  
5. The Heritage ........................................................... 61  

### A Man and His Children
6. A Man and His Children ........................................ 68  
7. A Man and His Ultimate Priority ............................... 85  
8. A Man and His Authority .......................................... 94  
9. Questions Pertaining to Children .............................. 109  

### A Man and His Wife
10. A Man and His Wife ............................................... 132  
11. A Man and the Straight Life ..................................... 153  

### A Man and His Work
12. A Man and His Work ............................................... 168  
13. A Man and His Money ............................................. 181  

### A Man and His Masculinity
14. A Man and a Woman and Their Biological Differences .... 192  
15. Whatever Happened to the Women’s Liberation Movement? 201  

### A Man and His Emotions
16. A Man and His Midlife Years ................................... 208  
17. A Man and His Emotions .......................................... 218  
18. A Man and His Animals .......................................... 227  

### A Man and His God
19. A Man and His God ................................................ 233  
20. A Man and His Death ............................................. 243  

### Notes ................................................................. 251
A Man Looks Back
The first edition of the book you are about to read was written more than two decades ago. It has sold more than a million copies since its publication and continues to represent my best understanding of what it means to be a man...God’s man...in today’s topsy-turvy world.

I was forty-four years old when Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives was first published, and indeed, several experiences in my personal life were highly relevant to its content. My father had died recently (as you will read in chapter 3) confronting me with my own mortality. My own unexpected heart attack some years later served to emphasize the point. Our children were still at home and our house was fairly crackling with adolescent activity. Most importantly, I was knee-deep in the infamous midlife years as I sat down to write.

As it turned out, I never did go through what is commonly known as a classic midlife crisis (as described in chapter 16), but I did do my share of critical thinking during that era. By contrast, many of my friends and associates did struggle through a troubling experience in their forties. Some
even went a little crazy when they realized that youth was gone and life was rapidly passing them by. Although sympathetic to their distress, I found it somewhat amusing to watch these men trying desperately to hold on to what was already long gone.

Twenty-plus years ago, and to some degree today, men in midlife crisis wore their self-doubt like a walking billboard for the whole world to see. Suit coats and ties were replaced by garish silk shirts, which were always left unbuttoned down in the direction of the navel. A bushy array of gray chest hair was usually on display. It had been carefully blow-dried. A gold medallion on a chain was usually nestled in the curly crop, presumably as a testimonial to youthful vigor. The men also did weird things with their hair, attempting to make a little look like a lot. (The frustrating thing about aging is that hair won’t grow on the top, but it sprouts abundantly in the nose and ears.) In serious cases of baldness, this meant whipping the sideburns over the top and then cementing everything in place with super glue. Sharp-pointed Italian type shoes finished off the garb, accompanied by Rolex watches (probably fake) and heavy jewelry on both hands. So much for the appropriate uniform.

Men in midlife crisis then sought to beef up their image with racy automobiles. Their cars had to be sleek, fast, and hot. A Porsche or a Ferrari conveyed the proper message, but a guy with financial problems might have to settle for a Volkswagen with mag wheels. Thus outfitted, the aging gentleman and his shaky ego set out to conquer worlds unknown.

Sexual conquest was, and still is, the ultimate proof of virility for the over-the-hill gang. These men often try their luck with younger...hopefully gorgeous...ladies. They flirt with their secretaries and make passes at every skirt that passes by. They are also frustrated by their wives’ age, because it reminds them of their own.

I heard of one such man who came in one night and asked his wife what she was smearing on her face.
“Cold cream,” she replied.
“What’s it for?” he asked naively.
“Wrinkles,” came the response.
He thought for a moment and then said, “Well the stuff is working. You got a whole raft of ’em.”

An article that appeared in a local newspaper described another man with a similar attitude who abandoned his wife and ran off with another woman. This is what it said,

A young man spotted a Mercedes for sale in a newspaper. He telephoned to inquire, assuming the figure must be a typographical error. A woman answered the phone and told him the figure was correct. He asked whether or not the car was damaged. “No, it’s in perfect condition,” she told him. Then why was she selling it at such a ridiculously low price? “Well, my husband just phoned me from Las Vegas. He’s there with his secretary. He told me he’s leaving me and that he went broke gambling. He asked me to sell the Mercedes and send him half of what I got for it. That’s just what I’m going to do!”

This playboy is only beginning to realize what his fun and games will cost him. The consequences of infidelity usually reverberate for a lifetime and touch every member of the family. I’m thankful, as I indicated earlier, that I did not experience these same pressures that brought the roof down on some of my friends. Shirley and I have now been married for over forty years and I couldn’t be happier about that fact. I own no silk shirts and I drive a four-door sedan. Nevertheless, I was confronted during the forties by some of the same unsettling thoughts that gnaw at the souls of other men in the midlife years.

It is almost impossible to bridge the awesome gap between the thirties and the fifties without wandering for a time through a dark valley. My
journey was no exception. For at least seven years, I went through a period best described as a time of “contemplative reassessment.” I was busily dealing in that decade with the many disturbing thoughts that echo through the mind of a man who realizes suddenly that he will not live forever. Whether he is a Christian, an atheist, an agnostic, or a New Ager, he must come to terms with these kinds of questions: “Who am I, really?” and “What am I doing here?” and “Is this the way I want to spend the rest of my life?” and “What really matters to me?” and “Who put me here?” and “What did He have in mind for me to accomplish?” and “Is Someone keeping score?” and “Is there life after death?” and “What will it be like to die?” These and many related questions seem to descend on men in rapid succession in midlife.

As a deeply committed believer in Jesus Christ, I had already answered the questions related to my faith and my relationship with my Maker. Nevertheless, I needed to transform my beliefs from a youthful abstraction to a personal reality. I also needed to get a new fix on my circumstances and objectives. Have you arrived at that point in life? Have you ever felt like you were running so fast and were so involved and entangled with the task of living that you were failing to notice about 90 percent of what was happening around you? That’s what was going on in my mind. By the time I had paid my taxes, fixed the leak in the roof, changed the tires on the car, raised my kids, and done my job and all the other stuff expected of me, an entire decade had gone by and it was only a blur in my memory. There are times like these for all of us when we need to pull back and say, “Just a minute, here, I need to do some thinking. Stop shouting at me, world, until I can get myself together.”

That process of reevaluation took about seven years to complete. I emerged from it with a stronger dedication to the fundamentals of what I had been taught…and to a determination to “stay the course.” Specifically, there were two conclusions that jumped out at me and which now serve as centerpieces of my system of values. Neither is new or particularly unique,
but perhaps my readers will find it helpful to review the basics on which family and spiritual stability are grounded.

The first realization that has shaped my attitude toward everything else has already been mentioned. I came face to face with the breathtaking brevity of life. The passage of time seemed like a well-greased string that was sliding through my taut fingers. I was but a short-term visitor on this planet. It is a tremendous shock to the system when it first sinks in that you are simply “passin’ through.”

I remember sitting in church one day when I was forty-eight years old, and I was thinking about what it would be like to be fifty. Then I thought of my father’s death at sixty-six. “Wow,” I said to myself. “I may only have eighteen years left.” Then I began calculating the meaning of those figures. (The sermon that morning must have been uninspiring.) I quickly realized that if I had lived forty-eight years and had eighteen to go, I had already “burned” 72 percent of my allotted time. What a stomach-grabber for a man who still thought of himself as Joe College! Nine years earlier, I had been in my thirties...still considered youthful...but two years hence I would be in my fifties...with only 24 percent of a lifetime left. Furthermore, there was not the slightest guarantee that I would be granted even one more hour.

I thought again about the meaning of the term “midlife.” It is a seductive lie for most of us; the middle thirties are the midlife years and the forties are the “two-thirds” years. In my case, I had hit the three-fourths years by age forty-eight. A humorous notion, perhaps, but a hammer blow to this guy who thought of himself as a very young man.

There were other insults. In an incident that has now become almost a “trademark” for me, I went to the YMCA one day to play basketball. I was an out-of-towner and unfamiliar with the guys who routinely played there in Dallas. I must have looked eighty years old to the teenagers on the court that day. They couldn’t figure why a decrepit dude like me would think he
could play a young man's game. But what could they do? I was there and they had to include me.

We divided the troops that day into a four-on-four arrangement, and I was assigned to guard a seventeen-year-old black athlete. This kid was loaded with natural talent, and he knew it. He was as smooth as silk. Despite the mismatch, however, I rose to the challenge. I reached back about twenty years and pulled up some moves long forgotten. Adrenalin surged through my body, and the old thrill came back. Through luck and pluck, I scored about three quick baskets in the face of this young hotshot. With that, he took a step back, put his hands on his hips, and said, “Man! You must have been sompin' in yo' prime!”

His words stuck in my heart. “My prime?! I couldn’t even remember my prime!” I soon grabbed my warm-up jacket and headed back to the hotel. My self-concept wobbled violently for a few days.

Many writers have attempted to describe this emotional impact of comprehending life’s brevity for the first time. One of my favorites is the late Erma Bombeck. I saw her as a guest on the “Phil Donahue Show” when she was asked if she was sensitive about her age.

“What at all,” she replied.

“Then how old are you?” Phil asked.

“I’m somewhere between estrogen and death,” she answered.

Erma went on to say that her next-door neighbor wore a pacemaker, and every time he sneezed, her garage door opened.

Some of Mrs. Bombeck’s pronouncements were not intended to be funny, however. In fact, they contained striking observations about life. One such statement about the aging process appeared in her book If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits? Included in that collection of writings was a short piece entitled “When Does the Mother Become the Daughter and the Daughter Become the Mother?” It focused on her relationship with her own mom, which underwent a radical role reversal with
the passage of time. Her mother had always been so strong, so independent and secure. Erma admired her and attempted to model herself after the one who had brought her into the world. But in recent years, the mother was undeniably becoming more childlike.

Erma first noticed the change when they were riding in a car one day. She was driving, and her mom was sitting near the right front door. Suddenly, an emergency occurred causing Erma to slam on the brakes. Instinctively, she reached out to keep her mother from hitting the windshield. When the crisis had passed, the two women sat looking at one another. Each realized that something had changed in their relationship...for in prior years Mom would have attempted to protect Erma.

Then there was the following Thanksgiving when Erma baked the turkey and her mother set the table. Clearly, the mother was becoming the daughter and the daughter was becoming the mother. As time passed, the transformation became more dramatic. When the two women were going shopping, it was Erma who said, “My goodness, don’t you look nice in that new dress” and, “Don’t forget to wear your sweater so you won’t be cold in the department stores.” Echoing in her mind was the advice of a concerned mother, “Button up your coat, Erma. Wear you galoshes, stay warm, take care of yourself.”

Erma understood the new role she was asked to play, but resisted it vigorously. She didn’t want to see this strong, noble woman become dependent...childlike...insecure. Nevertheless, the inexorable march of time could not be resisted. She had to get her mother up at night to take her to the bathroom and to care for most of her physical needs. How different the relationship had become. When Erma was a kindergartner, she had made a plaster of paris “hand,” which decorated the kitchen for years. Forty years later, Mom was sent to a senior citizen’s crafts class where she made a macramé. It eventually hung in her room in the Bombeck home.

As senility began to creep in, Erma found her own frustration rising to a
crescendo. She said, “Mom! Will you please quit talking about seeing Dad last night. You know he’s been gone for ten years.” But Mom couldn’t help it because she was no longer mentally competent. That completed the transformation. The mother had become the daughter and the daughter became the mother.

Shortly thereafter, Erma and her own daughter were riding in a car one day. There was a sudden stacking of cars and the illumination of brake lights. Instinctively, the daughter reached out to protect Erma from hitting the windshield. They looked at each other for a moment, and Erma said, “My Lord! How quickly!!”

How quickly, indeed! One of the most wrenching experiences of the forties for me was watching my mother become my daughter and beginning to look at me as her father. She and my dad had been best friends, and his loss was devastating to her. She never fully recovered from his sudden death. It was as though she had been cut in half.

I remember making a fatherly visit to see my mother one day in her little condo. After leaving, I wrote down a portion of our conversation as a reminder of that period of her life. This is the exact interchange that took place:

“How you doing today?”
“I’m holding my own.”
“Are you missing dad today?”
(pause) “I miss him every day.”
“I know. What do you suppose he’s doing right now?”
“I wish I knew. He’s probably off on Mars or Jupiter learning about how they’re made.”
“You loved him, didn’t you, Mom?”
“I loved him, Jim.”
“Mom, I worry about you staying in this condo too much. You really need to get out and mix with people—get involved in something.”
“No, I’m all right. I just don’t have any desire to go anymore.”
“I love you, Mom.”
“I love you, Jim.”

The son was becoming the father and the mother was becoming the daughter. Her mind then began to slip and many of the experiences of Erma Bombeck became my own. Mom was soon afflicted with Parkinson’s disease and slowly began a long descent toward her death in 1988. Another conversation occurred twenty-one months before her passing that proved to be historic. I recorded the following comments on a pocket Dictaphone immediately after a remarkable encounter had transpired.

Shirley and I just visited my mother in the nursing home where she resides. She has been rather deeply into senility in recent weeks and has been unable to either understand what we say or communicate with us. Yet today the Lord granted us a brief reprieve. She was asleep when we arrived and we gently sat on her bedside and awakened her. She instantly recognized us, and for the first time in weeks she was able to express her thoughts and understand the love that we gave to her. I took that opportunity, not knowing if it would return, to stroke her forehead and pat her hand and thank her for being a good mother. I thanked her for being a good wife to my father—a good pastor’s wife, even though it was he who was called to the ministry. I thanked her for living according to the principles of Christianity and staying true to the Christ whom she accepted when she was twenty years old. I stroked her face and thanked her for sacrificing to help me through college, doing without things that she needed. I thanked her for coming to our house when we were on our honeymoon and putting twenty dollars worth of groceries and staples in our cupboard when I knew she didn’t have those same items in hers. I told her how she was loved, not only by us, but by the Lord Himself. She smiled—she understood. She took my
hand and said, “You know I’ve been thinking.” And I said, “What have you been thinking about?” And she said, “That it’s almost over. I’ve almost made it. It’s almost done.” I said, “Mom, when you make that crossing, you know my dad is going to be waiting for you on the other side.” She smiled and understood. Then I said, “Jesus is waiting for you, too. And He’s going to say, ‘Well done! Thou good and faithful servant.’” Then I prayed for her and thanked the Lord for the influence of a good woman, and for her love in my life. She returned our love and we said good-bye. At this stage of life, we never know when the last opportunity to communicate soul to soul has occurred. If this proves to be that last window of opportunity, I am grateful for the Lord’s presence in that room today.

As it turned out, that was the final rational conversation I had with my mother. I will always be thankful for those concluding moments at the close of her time on earth.

This rapid passage of time that we have discussed is not just relevant to those in the midlife years, although it becomes more apparent as we get older. For those who are younger, let me suggest that you conduct your own investigation. Look carefully at your family, and especially at the changing relationships with your own children. It is there, up close and personal, that the pace of life will come into focus. If you were riding on a passenger train and wished to judge the speed at which you and it were traveling, the distant mountains would be of little help. You’d get a better approximation by looking at the ground nearest the train. Likewise, those loved ones closest to you are the best measure of the dramatic changes in process. Children remain children for a brief moment, and hardly a day is the same as the next. It is in their growth and development that the dynamic nature of living is seen.

I can almost hear your thoughts as I write, “What morbid ideas! Why would anyone want to contemplate the passage of time and focus on the
brevity of life?” The answer comes directly from Scripture. The temporary quality of this life is a very important biblical concept! King David said, “As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more” (Psalm 103:15-16, KJV). Moses shared that perspective and said, “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom” (Psalm 90:12, KJV). Wisdom, you see, comes from understanding the temporary nature of this life. Jesus, on the other hand, referred to a rich man who thought he had years to live and called him a “fool.” We would also be foolish to assume that things will always be as they are, or that eternal matters can be dealt with later. For all we know, “This night thy soul shall be required of thee” (Luke 12:20, KJV). If that is the nature of this human existence, then we would do well to acknowledge it and live our lives accordingly. That fact hit me hard during my own midlife years!

Let’s move now to the second major conclusion that emerged from the discomfort of my own midlife years. It was this: The only true source of meaning in life is found in love for God and His son Jesus Christ, and love for mankind, beginning with our own families. Compared to this fundamental system of values, everything else is puny and insignificant. Certainly, there must be a more valid reason for living than the mere pursuit of money and possessions!

Shirley and I have seen the material world from the bottom up, to be sure. We had absolutely nothing when we were married and it looked for about ten years like we were destined to keep it. We didn’t have any financial problems because we had no finances. I finally clawed my way through the doctoral program at the University of Southern California and escaped the oppressive tuition that had strangled us. After graduation, I immediately joined the faculty of the USC School of Medicine and began earning a livable salary. Then I wrote my first book, and we were finally able to purchase and furnish a house.
I would not be truthful if I denied the satisfaction derived from this establishment of a home and a “place” for our kids. During the midlife years, however, we realized how temporary and how empty those things can be if not kept in proper perspective. The Lord seemed to use some everyday object lessons to emphasize this truth to Shirley and me. On one occasion it was a simple table game that caught my attention. I had been a dedicated game player as a kid, and especially loved Monopoly by Parker Brothers. I could wheel and deal with the best of ’em! But those days were gone and almost forgotten by the time our sixteen-year-old daughter came home raving about “a new game called Monopoly.” She begged Shirley and me to take her on, and we consented.

We sat down to play one evening after Ryan had gone to bed, and very quickly I caught the old excitement of the game. And why not? I began prospering almost from the beginning. Before long I owned Boardwalk and Park Place, Illinois, Kentucky, Indiana, and even Baltic and Mediterranean. I started putting little green houses everywhere, and soon they were traded in for big red hotels. It was wonderful. My family was squirming like crazy and I was loving it. I had five-hundred-dollar bills stuffed in my pockets, under the board, and even in my shoe. What I was experiencing was green-eyed greed, pure and simple.

The game ended precipitously when Shirley and Danae landed on my hotels in quick succession and suffered irreversible financial collapse. Suddenly, it was over. I had won. My family was pretty disgusted with my unsportsmanlike conduct by that point, so they went off to bed in a huff and left me to put away the game. There I was sitting alone in the family room around midnight, feeling strangely empty and unfulfilled. All of my earlier excitement and competitive energy were left with nowhere to go. I had won the game. So what? I began sorting all my money and laboriously putting it back in the box. My beautiful five-hundred-dollar bills were begrudgingly returned to the “bank.” Then I stacked and replaced my coveted
property...Boardwalk and Park Place included. My amassed fortune was disappearing in front of my eyes.

That’s when it seemed that the Lord spoke to me. No, it was not an audible voice, but these were my thoughts in the family room on that night:

Jim, pay attention now. I’m about to teach you a lesson. That’s not just the game of Monopoly you’ve been playing. It’s very much like the game of life. You sweat and struggle to acquire things...to build and grow...to get bank accounts, property, retirement programs, and a piece of the rock. You spend a lifetime accumulating...in search of security. Then one day, it suddenly ends. You’re going along minding your own business, when a strange pain develops gradually in your chest and then extends down your left arm. “Could this be...?” you ask yourself. Or you’re taking a morning shower and inadvertently discover a protrusion in the area of your abdomen. “I’ve never noticed a bump there before. Maybe I ought to check it out.” Or you’re driving your car and make a sudden lane change without looking in your rearview mirror. Just that quickly, the great quest for security and possessions is over. The game ends and everything must be returned to the box. The rules specify that nothing can be taken with you. Not one dime. There are no U-Haul trailers that follow the hearse to the cemetery. We come into the world with a clenched fist, and we die with an open hand. That’s what life does to us. Each person must then answer the question asked of the rich fool, “Whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12:20, kjv).

Since antiquity, men have tried desperately to beat the game and achieve some measure of earthly immortality. The Egyptians built pyramids and filled them with material wealth they hoped to take along to the next world. Sorry, Pharaoh. Grave robbers reaped the benefit of that miscalculation a
few centuries later. A thousand years hence, Spaniards hunted for the “foun-
tain of youth” to reverse the ravages of time. It was a nice thought.

The search continues today. Some of the ways modern man seeks to
“live” beyond the grave are as follows:

1. *Through art.* Rembrandt, Picasso, Mozart, Bach, Beethoven,
and Frank Lloyd Wright achieved some remembrance beyond
their passing.

2. *Through philanthropy.* Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Huntington
secured their place in the culture by building libraries, concert
halls, and hospitals in their memory.

immortalized their names...at least to this point.

4. *Through children.* Henry VIII was desperate for an heir, so that
his bloodline and legacy might survive his death.

5. *Through literature.* Plato, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and
Steinbeck will be remembered for centuries.

and Roosevelt have secured their place in history.

7. *Through conquest.* Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Adolph
Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Tse Tung are notable examples.

8. *Through science.* Galileo, Newton, Einstein, Edison, and Hubble
made the grade here.

9. *Through cryonics.* A more recent effort has led people to arrange
to have their bodies freeze-dried in hopes some future medical
technology will bring them back alive. Lots of luck!

There are other approaches to the pall that hangs over the entire human
race...the nagging specter of death. All of them have a basic flaw, however.
They permit only a person's memory to escape the grim reaper. Sooner or later,
even those who achieve cultural immortality will die like the rest of us. Like John Brown in the Civil War ballad: “His body lies a’molderin’ in the grave.”

True eternal life is available from only one source. It is a free gift to those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and accept His forgiveness for sin. Only through this Gate can we escape the sting of death and the “victory” of the grave.

“True enough,” a critic might reply, “but I’m not trying to accumulate wealth for my own use. My goal is to pass it along to my children and future generations. I want them to have it easier than I did...to enjoy a head start that only money can give.”

Shirley and I have spent many hours thinking and talking about that objective with reference to our own children. Even if were possible for us to leave them a large estate, would that be a wise thing to do? I think not. It takes a steady hand to hold a full cup, and many young people have been destroyed by money that burned its way through their lives.

In a sociological study published under the title Rich Kids, we read the case histories of individuals who inherited large trust funds. The findings were consistent: wealth passed to the second and third generations has typically wreaked havoc in the lives of the recipients. They fought each other to control it. They lost their incentives to work. They lived profligate lives. They shamefully wasted their resources. Some even committed suicide. When the apostle Paul said “the love of money is the root of all evil,” he spoke the truth.

Should it be our desire, then, to inflict this “evil” on our precious children? Not to excess, certainly. It makes sense to help the next generation get started or perhaps to assist with the purchase of their first homes. But if our objective is to generate wealth for those who will not earn it, we are putting our beloved children at high risk for satanic mischief. Likewise, we must not get so busy attempting to give our kids what we didn’t have as children that we fail to give them what we did have as kids.
Perhaps it is clear now why I emerged from the midlife years with some concepts firmly in place. My children (and other people) are the only things I can take to heaven with me. That’s why I left the medical school back in 1977 and declined almost all speaking invitations that came my way. It became clear to me that Danae and Ryan were temporary residents in our home...that they would soon be grown and on their own. Parenthood is a short-term affair, and the opportunity to lead and influence them was a “now or never” proposition. Thus, I retooled my professional responsibilities and focused heavily on my own family. I’ve made some bad decisions in my life and a few rather good ones, but this was my most brilliant moment. The empty nest did indeed come quickly, and I thank God I have not squandered my most precious privilege of participating in the lives of my children.

Let me leave you with a letter I wrote the day our son Ryan went off to college. Perhaps it will serve to punctuate this update on one of the most important topics I’ve ever addressed. Incorporated in this letter are all the primary conclusions I drew during the midlife years and which I wish I had understood fully when I first entered manhood.

Twenty-three precious years have come and gone since the morning of October 6, 1965, when our first child came into the world. An instant and irrational love affair was born that day between this new dad and his baby daughter, Danae Ann, who took center stage in the Dobson household. How deeply I love that little girl! She would stand in the doorway each morning and cry as I left for work, and then run giggling and breathless to meet me at the end of the day. You would have thought we had been separated for months. Could I ever love another child as much as this one? I wondered.

Then five years later a little lad named James Ryan made his grand entrance, and it all happened again. He was my boy—the only son I would ever be privileged to raise. What a joy it was to
watch him grow and develop and learn. How proud I was to be his father—to be trusted with the well-being of his soul. I put him to bed every night when he was small, and we laughed and we played and we talked about Jesus. I would hide his sister's stuffed animals around the house, and then we would turn out the lights and hunt them with flashlights and a toy rifle. He never tired of that simple game. But the day for games has passed.

This morning, you see, marked the official beginning of the “empty nest” for Shirley and me. Danae graduated from college a year ago and is now building an exciting life of her own. It was difficult for us to let her go, back in 1983, but we took comfort in Ryan’s six remaining years at home. How quickly those months have flown, and today, our formal years of parenthood came suddenly to an end. We took Ryan to the airport and sent him off to Colorado for a five-week summer program. Then in August, he plans to enter his freshman year at a college in the Midwest. Though he will be home periodically for years to come, our relationship will not be the same. It might be even better, but it will certainly be different. And I have never liked irreversible change.

Though for many years I knew this moment was coming, and though I had helped others cope with similar experiences, I admit freely that Ryan’s departure hit me hard. For the past two weeks, we have worked our way through a massive accumulation of junk in his room. Ryan is a collector of things no one else would want—old street signs, broken models, and favorite fishing rods. The entire family took tetanus shots, and we plunged into the debris. Finally last night, Shirley and Ryan packed the remaining boxes and emptied the last drawer. The job was finished. His suitcases were packed. Our son was ready to go.

Ryan came into my study about midnight, and we sat down for
another of the late-night chats that I have cherished. He has always liked to talk at the end of the day. I won’t tell you what we said in that final conversation. It is too personal to share with anyone. I can only say that the morning came too quickly, and we drove as a family to the airport. There I was, driving down the freeway, when an unexpected wave of grief swept over me. I thought I couldn’t stand to see him go. It was not that I dreaded or didn’t look forward to what the future held. No, I mourned the end of an era—a precious time of my life when our children were young and their voices rang in the halls of our house. I couldn’t hide the tears as we hugged good-bye at Gate 18. Then Shirley and I drove alone to our house, where a beloved son and daughter had grown from babies to young adults. There I lost it again!

The house that we had left three hours earlier in a whirlwind of activity had been transformed in our absence. It had become a monastery—a morgue—a museum. The silence was deafening to us both. Every corner of it held a memory that wafted through the air. I meandered to Ryan’s room and sat on the floor by his bed. His crib had once stood on that spot. Though many years had passed, I could almost see him as toddler—running and jumping to my open arms. What a happy time that was in my life. The ghost of a kindergartner was there, too, with his brand-new cowboy clothes and his Snoopy lunch pail. Those images are vivid in my mind today. Then a seven-year-old boy appeared before me. He was smiling, and I noticed that his front teeth were missing. His room was filled with bugs and toads and a tarantula named Pebber. As I reached out to hug him, he quietly disappeared. Then a gangly teenager strolled through the door and threw his books on his desk. He looked at me as if to say, “Come on, Dad. Pull yourself together!”

My own words now come back to mind. I remember saying in
my second film series, Turn Your Heart Toward Home, that the day was coming soon when “the bicycle tires would be flat, the skateboard would be warped and standing in the garage, the swing set would be still, and the beds would not be slept in. We will go through Christmas with no stockings hanging by the fireplace, and the halls will be very quiet. I know those times will soon be here, and I realize it has to be so. I accept it. I wouldn’t for anything try to hold back our son or daughter when it comes time to go. But that will also be a very sad day because the precious experience of parenting will have ended for me.” Alas, the day that I anticipated has just arrived.

If you’re thinking that I am hopelessly sentimental about my kids, you’re right. The greatest thrill of my life has been the privilege of raising them day by day in the service of the Lord. Still, I did not expect such intense pain at the time of Ryan’s departure. I thought I was prepared to handle the moment, but I quickly realized just how vulnerable I am to the people I love.

In a large sense, however, it is not merely the end of formal parenting that has shaken my world today. I grieve for the human condition itself. When Ryan boarded that plane in Los Angeles, I comprehended anew the brevity of life and the temporary nature of all things. As I sat on the floor in his room, I heard not only Ryan’s voice but the voices of my mother and father who laughed and loved in that place. Now they are gone. One day Shirley and I will join them. First one and then the other. We are just “passing through,” as the gospel songwriters used to say. All of life boils down to a series of happy “hellos” and sad “good-byes.” Nothing is really permanent, not even the relationships that blossom in a healthy home. In time, we must release our grip on everything we hold dear. Yes. I felt the chilly breeze of change blowing through
my home this morning, and I understood its meaning.

If we really grasped the brevity of our lives on this earth, we would surely be motivated to invest ourselves in eternal values. Would a fifty-year-old man pursue an adulterous affair if he knew how quickly he would stand before his God? Would a woman make herself sick from in-law conflict or other petty frustrations if she knew how little time was left to her? Would men and women devote their lives to the pursuit of wealth and symbols of status if they realized how soon their possessions would be torn from their trembling hands? It is the illusion of permanence, you see, that distorts our perception and shapes our selfish behavior. When eternal values come in view, our greatest desire is to please the Lord and influence as many of our loved ones for Him as possible.

I ask each of my readers this important question. If we fully understood that the eternal souls of our children hung in the balance today—that only by winning them for Christ could we spend eternity together in heaven—would we change the way this day is lived? Would we ignore and neglect so great an opportunity if our eyes were fully opened to this awesome responsibility? I think not. I pray not.

Addressing myself now to the mothers and fathers of young children, I urge you to keep this eternal perspective in view as you race through the days of your lives. Don’t permit yourselves to become discouraged with the responsibilities of parenting. Yes, it is an exhausting and difficult assignment, and there are times when you will feel like throwing in the towel. But I beg you to stay the course! Get on your knees before the Lord and ask for His strength and wisdom. Finish the job to which He has called you! There is no more important task in living, and you will understand that assignment more clearly when you stand where Shirley and I are
today. In the blink of an eye, you will be hugging your children good-bye and returning to an empty house. That is the way the system works.

God bless you all. I love you in the name of Christ.