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Your
GROWN
CHILDREN

Affirming, Helping, and Establishing Boundaries

FOCUS[®]
ON THE FAMILY

Debra Evans

Blessing Your Grown Children



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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
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Also by Debra Evans

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*To my dad and mom, John and Nancy Munger,
whose love and blessing encourage me still.
To my husband and partner in parenting, David,
with whom I continue to share each step along the way
by the grace of our generous Father.*

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A NOTE ABOUT THE PEOPLE IN THIS BOOK

For the sake of protecting everyone's privacy, with the exception of my family's privacy in certain instances, I have changed the names of the people whose stories I shared in this book, and in various cases I have created composites of their stories based on the conversations and correspondence I have had the privilege of sharing with them. In every case, I obtained permission from the people I wrote about before including them in *Blessing Your Grown Children*. I trust you will gain encouragement and understanding as you consider the familiar themes, questions, and concerns voiced by so many of my valued friends, colleagues, and acquaintances.

INTRODUCTION

When we ask God to bless our families, how do we partner with Him in this endeavor? What means are available to us in this pursuit?

These are the two main questions I invite you to explore with me as you read *Blessing Your Grown Children*.

When I began working on this book, my husband, Dave, and I were living alone at our house in Austin, Texas, our adopted hometown for the past eighteen years. Our adult children, having long since left home, were then residing in a variety of places in Texas and Colorado, with only one of them choosing to settle nearby.

Given our fairly predictable “now that the kids are grown” daily routine at the time, I had every reason to expect that the writing process would be a relatively straightforward experience involving about fifteen weeks’ worth of extended retreats spent in the quiet calm of my household office.

But before we knew it, all three of our long-gone grown kids unexpectedly returned to live in Austin, with two of them temporarily moving back into our home.

The first thing to go was my office. I quickly packed, pushed, and piled everything from the two bedrooms where our son and daughter would be staying into the spare, windowless space I’ve always used for writing. That was the easy part. After all, laptops are ideally designed for off-site use and easy portability, aren’t they?

The second thing that went was my writing schedule. As our children one by one faced large life transitions and complex crises—emergency-room visits and hospitalizations, new jobs, a third pregnancy following two miscarriages within the same year, heart surgery,

long-distance relocations, financial stresses, challenges related to coping with chronic illness, and more—my husband and I rearranged our daily plans as needed. We also found ourselves coming face-to-face with our past, present, and future roles as parents.

The third thing to disappear was my rough draft of this book. When I realized the manuscript I had been working on didn't offer the most important ideas and suggestions that *I* needed to think about, consider, and learn from as a suddenly-and-truly-we're-now-deep-in-the-thick-of-things second-stage parent, I started over. Looking back, I think there was much more God wanted to teach me, by experience, before I shared with you what seems to work best and what doesn't when it comes to blessing our adult children.

I offer my suggestions now not because I've become an expert on this subject, but because I believe that no matter what comes up on our parenting journey, God is there and His wisdom and help are constantly available to us when we seek Him. Page by page, I want to pass this encouragement along to you.

If you picked up *Blessing Your Grown Children* thinking that it's possible to bless your adult son or daughter while remaining at a safe distance from his or her struggles and your imperfections, you may not want to continue reading past this sentence. On the other hand, if you, like me, find yourself traveling through an unpredictable and sometimes tumultuous landscape in which God appears to be inviting us to trust Him in new ways, please keep reading.

Before Going Further: Is This Book for Me?

Please check any of the following statements that currently apply to your relationship with your adult child:

- ❑ I desire to invest the gifts of my time, material resources, wisdom, and love in my adult child's life, but it's sometimes challenging to find the right balance.
- ❑ I want to bless my grown child, but I'm not sure how to go about it.
- ❑ I'd like to enlarge my appreciation for the meaning of "blessing" as an action of word, deed, or intentional prayer for the benefit of my adult child and to learn how to practice it more wisely.
- ❑ As a parent, I hope to avoid the problems that may arise from my doing too little or too much, not letting go, holding on to the past, and not learning from my earlier mistakes.
- ❑ I want to grow in my understanding of how to compassionately and considerately express my love for my grown child.
- ❑ I occasionally, or often, feel uncertain about my role and responsibilities as the parent of an adult child.
- ❑ I want to more consistently acknowledge and not be afraid to admit to my adult child my mistakes, limitations, and imperfections when it's appropriate to do so.
- ❑ I want to more intentionally practice blessing my grown child as an expression of the love God has given me for my family and as a reflection of my relationship with Christ.
- ❑ I feel pressured by or uncomfortable around others when they talk about their adult child's accomplishments because my son or daughter is experiencing physical, emotional, vocational, relational, and/or spiritual difficulty right now.

- I like/don't like the person my grown child seems to be becoming, and I want to focus on entrusting God's good plans and purposes for his or her life.
- I see some similar personality traits and lifestyle habits in my adult son or daughter that I see in myself, bringing both challenges and opportunities to our maturing relationship.
- Sometimes I'm unclear about my role in helping my adult child leave the nest.
- I'd like to stop measuring my success as a parent based on what my adult child does and doesn't do.
- I'm open to taking the next steps in my parenting journey with an emphasis on loving, valuing, cherishing, and accepting my grown child as an independent adult.

If you checked one or more of the boxes in this list, welcome to *Blessing Your Grown Children*. Whatever is happening today in our lives, wherever we live, it is my hope that these pages will be a reminder of the vital part we have yet to play in blessing our children in the midst of life as it actually is right now. Glad to be here with you.

PART I

The Questions: Learning as We Go

*The LORD is gracious and full of
compassion, slow to anger and great in
mercy. The LORD is good to all, and His
tender mercies are over all His works.*

—PSALM 145:8-9, NKJV

*This is what all the work of grace
aims at—an ever-deeper knowledge of
God, and an ever-closer relationship
with Him.*

—J. I. PACKER

CHAPTER ONE

What's Next?

*To perceive and then to decide—God
does not show us the whole way but
only the next step.*

—INGRID TROBISCH

“The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing,” the French philosopher Blaise Pascal once wisely observed.


These classic words carry the ring of truth. Today, as I watched our oldest daughter backing her car out of our driveway, for an instant the grown woman she has become seemed to suddenly vanish, leaving in her wake the unforgotten image of a giggling towheaded toddler climbing into her molded plastic car seat.

Joanna is now a creative and motivated mother of two amazing daughters not unlike herself. Her day-to-day schedule keeps her going from the moment she gets out of bed in the morning, providing little rest until her head sinks back down into the pillow at night.

No question about it—every day my daughter energetically confronts the rewards and risks associated with her adult independence, no parental supervision required. Even so, every once in a

while, whenever I unexpectedly catch a glimpse of Joanna's budding former self in my mind's eye, tears have a way of springing up as I watch her once again step out our door.

This morning, a photo of Joanna's baby dedication caught my



Stephanie and Patrick

I've known Stephanie since we were teenagers. No longer located in the same state, we stay in touch by phone, praying for and with each other regularly. Through the years of being young brides, first-time mothers, and parents of school-age children, not once did she and I imagine that we would someday be faced with the challenges associated with grown children affected by life-threatening chronic health conditions.

A few years ago, Stephanie called, her voice shaking. She told me her son, Patrick, was missing after abandoning his car hours earlier in downtown Detroit. It was unclear whether he was still alive. After she explained to me the details she knew so far, we immediately began praying.


As we did, one of Patrick's friends called on Stephanie's cell phone; I could hear him saying that he had located Patrick, who appeared to be experiencing a manic episode related to the bipolar disorder he lives with. He was threatening to harm himself. The police were there and an ambulance had arrived. It was likely that Patrick would be transported to a state behavioral-care hospital and admitted for treatment.

"I don't know if I can handle this, Debra," Stephanie told me later that night.

"I know how you feel," I replied.

We both sat in silence, too sad to cry.

attention. Looking closely at the familiar image of our daughter snuggled in my arms, I thought, *The longer I travel this parenting journey, the more it feels as if the road I'm on has taken me in a much different direction than I expected.*



"This isn't what I pictured it would be like," she said.

"Me either, Steph."

"What am I going to do? How can I help Patrick? Tell me this is going to get better. Tell me this won't ever happen again. Tell me what to do with this terrible pain I feel ripping across the center of my chest."

"I know what you mean," I whispered.

"I know you do."

"So, we're not giving up. No matter what it looks like or how it feels right now," I acknowledged, "you and I have seen what God alone has done and what only He can do."

"We have." On the other end of the phone, I heard Stephanie take a deep breath, hold it, and then exhale slowly.

We both sat in silence for several minutes, turning our thoughts toward the one sure source of help we knew.

"Steph, the cross is bigger than this."

"Yes, it is, Debra."

Long silence. Space to breathe. Time to remember.

"God is with us. Jesus left the ninety-nine to go after the one wandering alone in the wild. A little while ago, Stephanie, Patrick was nowhere to be found."

"Let's keep praying."

It doesn't matter how old they are. Regardless of my adult children's independence and abilities, I still find myself wanting to shelter them from the storms that can arise without warning, from the pain and brokenness of our fallen world, and thereby somehow guide them away from unseen danger back to safety.

Yes, I know. Of course this isn't reasonable. I believe God can and does do this and much, much more—perfectly—all the time.

I acknowledge and accept my limits. I really do.

So, when it comes to the adult-to-adult relationship I share with my now-grown children, how can I fully explain my heart's steady resistance to my head's studied logic?

Where is your heart resisting your head's logic today? Perhaps you're trying to adjust to your empty nest, or you might be dealing with an adult child who has made a few costly choices that have presented you with some hard decisions about the boundaries you need to set.

Like my friend Theresa, whose thirty-two-year-old developmentally disabled daughter lives at home, you may find your chronic sorrow getting in the way of your ability to think clearly about what is needed. For Daniel, his biggest challenge as a father lies in knowing how much and when to intervene when his son with substance-abuse disorder relapses. Or maybe you can relate to Kate and Stephen, who sometimes lie awake at night wondering what happened with their grown daughters, neither of whom considers herself a Christian.

Are we ready to move beyond our resistance to accepting our sons and daughters not for who we want them to be but as the men and women they actually are? As we go through this book together, we'll take a closer look at our longing for control in situations like these and how we can recognize and surrender this desire. I'll ask you to examine and expand your ideas about what it means to find

happiness and success as a parent. I will also encourage you to draw near to and depend on God more deeply as you extend the blessings you receive from Him to your adult child.

From Intimacy to Independence

While our relationships with our spouses and best friends began with distant nonacquaintance and gradually moved toward more familiar ways of sharing, our parenthood began not with a wave of hello but with our baby's conception—the most intimate human connection imaginable.

From the earliest moments, the magnitude of the gift was made real: This child is God's masterpiece, created in His image, designed for His purpose, brought to life for His glory . . .

We accepted responsibility for this gift, believing that our child would forever belong to his or her Creator, not to us. We understood that our son or daughter would be with us only for a limited time. We accepted our unwritten job description, acknowledged the daily investment required, and appreciated the enduring nature of our role. But somewhere in the midst of walking through the next twenty years, it was often easy to forget our destination. Though we realized from the start that the goal of our attachment was our child's detachment from us, the temporary focus of our occupation felt as if it was permanent.

Before parenthood, we didn't understand the depth of the sacrifice, the scope of the demands, the cost of the commitment. As the baby's due date approached, we made room and stocked the nursery while wondering what having another person living in the house would be like. Our options narrowed concerning how we would spend our time, our money, and our Saturday mornings. Slowly but

surely we climbed the mountain and faced our fears on the way up. Remember?

Upon happily receiving our child into our arms at the grand finale of those nine months of intimate nurture, we found we had not only given birth to our first child, but we had also been given birth into a new identity ourselves.

Mother . . . Father. The words sounded as if they belonged to someone else, reminding us of our parents. Day by day and night by night, we responded to the call of our valuable vocation. Years passed. We gradually recognized the true meaning of our title.

Every day, whether we actively thought about it or not, we drew nearer to distancing ourselves from this most important job. More questions presented themselves; some remain unanswered: Will he stay safe and healthy? How will she use her God-given gifts and talents? When will he come to know Christ? Whom will she marry, if anyone? Where will he live? Is her income enough to meet her expenses? What if he makes the wrong choices? In which direction will she go if she fails?

Now that we're here, on this other side of the parenting journey, it's clear that the time has come, in a sense, to give birth once again. It is in this stage of parenting, where no ceremonies, showers, or celebrations commemorate our new role, that our children are birthed into their independence.

An Unpredictable Path

My friend Pam tells me that when her two sons were young, she often imagined what her life might be like when, at long last, they were finally grown up and living on their own:

No more settling ugly sibling-rivalry disputes! No more car-pools! An end, at last, to irritating animal noises, extensive pediatrician's visits, huge laundry pileups, interrupted sleep, safety-locked cabinets, and regularly recurring messes!

There were days when it seemed as if life would never be "normal" again, when the thought of the kids launching out on their own seemed so far off in the distance, I began doubting it would ever actually happen. I pictured my husband and myself going on long cruises together, blissfully sailing toward some faraway exotic harbor.

I thought about what it would be like to be able to get out my watercolor box and sit outdoors painting for hours on end without anyone shouting, "Mom! Hurry! Come quickly! I need you!" I could sign up for a cooking class and make an entire meal consisting of the foods only Chris and I would enjoy eating. Needless to say, we'd also sleep long hours on weekends together, without locking our bedroom door.

Now that her sons are thirty and thirty-two, with the eldest living at the family's home following grad school and business setbacks, Pam realizes that the joys and challenges of parenting her boys during their early years were relatively simple and straightforward tasks compared to coping with the post-childhood, second-stage parenting complexities she now faces.

While my friend has done many of the fun and fabulous things she once imagined doing—taking a Caribbean cruise, painting nature scenes outdoors, making Greek stew with marinated lamb and couscous salad, sleeping in late on Saturdays—not once did she picture herself indefinitely residing under the same roof with her grown child.

Rather than dwell in the past, move into your new home—second-stage parenting. See what's next. Accept your offspring's adulthood. Actively support your son's or daughter's autonomy. Stay focused on the big picture.

Can you relate to Pam's situation? The truth is that making the transition from parenting young kids to understanding, accepting, and loving our grown children, adult to adult, is an unpredictable process for which there is no foolproof recipe.

Present Grace

We bring the entire history of our parenting experiences into every encounter we share with our adult children, and while delightful memories of distant events remain alive in our hearts—inevitably provoking a smile, or tears, at random moments—there is no turning back to an earlier time. There is only moving forward, no matter what today looks like.

Even if we can't go back, we can face this moment and bring something good to it. Through prayerfully and mindfully letting go, moving beyond the past, and acknowledging what lies behind us, we can turn toward the future with God's present grace.

When our kids were young, our parenting efforts concentrated on promoting their well-being, shaping their character, and guiding their decision making. Now that we're no longer responsible for them in any of these areas, what's next? How do we let go of our

most consuming concerns for our grown children and change our focus? Are we ready to accept them as they are and surrender to God our preoccupation with our expectations of them? When will we trust Him more fully with our maturing family's care?

Learning how to lovingly affirm and wisely support our grown kids as we let them go—letting them know they are accepted and valued based on who they are rather than on what they achieve or believe—requires humility, a genuine desire for God's leading, and a willingness to change. A quote widely attributed to Corrie ten Boom advises us: "Hold everything in your hands lightly—otherwise it hurts when God pries your fingers open."

Like learning how to nurture our children when they were younger, blessing them as adults is a series of choices we make rather than a process we instantly or easily acquire. Rather than constantly picturing our grown kids turning out a certain way, we decide again and again that we will love and cherish them not because of what they do, but for who they are.

What strengthens our parent-child bond post-childhood? Which healthy strategies will we choose to apply as a means of nurturing and maintaining our adult parent-adult child relationships? When

Decide that you won't correct or try to redirect, subtly or not so subtly, your adult child's behavior for something specific he or she has recently said or done. Seek God's wisdom, forgive your son or daughter, set boundaries if needed, and keep moving forward.

the going gets tough or we miss being with our grown children, how shall we bless them while valuing and respecting their adult independence?

By better understanding the limits of our God-given responsibility and acquiring wisdom regarding the ways to bless our grown children, we'll strengthen and refresh our relationship with them, nurturing it by our actions, attitudes, and prayers in the midst of human frailty and imperfection. In seeking God and His wisdom first, we find we're able to discern and embrace more fully the vital role we have yet to play.

Words to Remember

- Wise men and women are always learning, always listening for fresh insights. (Proverbs 18:15, MSG)
- There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. (Ecclesiastes 3:1)
- I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (Job 42:2)

Real Adults Share Their Stories

For a long time, my mom just didn't seem to get me at all. We're very different, and as I've grown older, it felt like we had less rather than more in common. The distance between us eventually grew to the point where I didn't want to call or visit her.

When Mom called and encouraged me to spend a week with her and Dad at their summer home, something in her voice let me know that she was more willing to listen to what I had to say.

I'm glad she reached out and left the decision up to me. Her

willingness to stop being defensive about the past and put her focus on the present—the positive strengths and experiences we're now building upon—has been encouraging. We've laughed and cried together in ways I didn't experience with her when I was younger.

I'm not sure how or why this happened, but if I had to guess, I'd say Mom finally missed me enough to come to terms with the fact that I'm not the person she thinks I should be. While her acceptance doesn't mean we don't disagree—we still do, of course—it does mean I find her easier to talk to and be around. And that's been an amazing gift for us both.

—Natalie

For Personal Reflection

1. Before my child became an adult, I used to think . . .
2. Once my child was an adult, I realized . . .
3. As I look toward the future, my role as a parent seems to be . . .

Prayers

Praying God's Blessing for My Family

O my soul, bless God. From head to toe, I'll bless His holy name! O my soul, bless God, don't forget a single blessing! He forgives our sins—every one. He heals our diseases—every one. He redeems us from hell—saves our lives! He crowns us with love and mercy—a paradise crown. He wraps us in goodness—beauty eternal. He renews our youth—we're always young in His presence. God makes everything come out right; He puts victims back on their feet. (Adaptation of Psalm 103:1-6, MSG)

Praying God's Blessing for My Grown Child

I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength! (Ephesians 1:17-19, MSG)

Blessings Now

- Take a closer look at your expectations of your grown child at present. Write down as many as you can think of; then identify the three or four on your list that seem the most unrealistic. Extend grace instead of criticism in the coming years to your son or daughter in these areas.
- Look at your son or daughter in person or in a recent photograph. If your son or daughter is or isn't actively following Christ at present, in what ways does this affect the way you see him or her? How will you seek to find God's image reflected in your imperfect adult child (as well as yourself) today?
- Consider what it means to you to help your grown child. If you're offering your support as a way to feel better about yourself, experience less loneliness, alleviate his or her responsibility, ease your guilt, look good to others, and/or exercise parental control, you could be hurting more than helping. Ask yourself how your help may be adding to or detracting from your son's or daughter's adult need to

(1) find ways to set and achieve goals, (2) accept responsibility for decisions, (3) enjoy accomplishments, and (4) learn from mistakes.

- Before offering your help, think it through as much as possible, keeping your adult child's best interests in mind and setting necessary limits where needed. Remember that if something is important enough to your adult child, he or she will be willing to think, act, and work to make it happen.
- Understand your limitations and use your influence wisely. Don't treat your grown-up child like a little kid. Instead, take your relationship to the next level. Recognize and affirm by your words and actions that you value your adult-to-adult relationship. View your grown son or daughter as capable of leading his or her own life.
- Review your definition of parental "success" and determine where it came from. If it involves comparing yourself and your grown child to others, you may be experiencing feelings of frustration, inadequacy, and disappointment. For the rest of the week, pay attention to your ongoing thoughts in this regard. Confront any "if only" or "what might have been" detours as they arise in your mind with the reality of God's loving, life-giving grace.
- Keep being a positive role model for your adult child. Love faithfully; live generously; remain confident that your actions will always speak louder than your words. Your son or daughter is still influenced by your attitudes, values, behavior, and beliefs, which may yet encourage him or her to make meaningful changes.

Getting and Staying Unstuck

Where do you most want God to bring change, renewal, and restoration to your relationship with your grown child? Put simply, we're no longer in charge of our grown children's choices or responsible for the choices they make. In exchange for the unnecessary burdens we take on by wanting to control the uncontrollable and trying to fix the unfixable, with God's help and the wise support of others we can see where changes are needed now. If and when we get stuck in this area, we can set specific boundaries with our adult children and start moving in a new direction.

Getting Unstuck

Consider the following questions and answer them honestly.

1. What changes are needed most in my relationship with my adult child?
2. Am I willing to make these necessary changes?
3. How do I view the changes I need to make?
4. What will be gained and what will be lost if I make these changes?

5. Where do I need to place boundaries to provide for and protect the changes I need to make?

6. Who are the safe people with whom I will remain open and accountable about my decisions concerning these necessary changes?

Staying Unstuck

Surround yourself with safe people who believe you can change, who encourage your efforts to make needed changes, and with whom you can pray about these changes:

- *Gain new perspective and encouragement from professionals trained to work with adults in transition, including marriage and family counselors, pastors, licensed psychologists, therapists, social workers, spiritual directors, addiction experts, educators, and health-care providers. Determining which professionals are best suited to help you will depend on what you need, what their approach is, who is available, and where you are located, as well as how much time and money you can afford to spend. If you need a referral, ask someone acquainted with family resources in your area whose opinion you value, or call Focus on the Family (800-A-Family).*
- *Let the people in your support network know that you want to make changes in your relationship with your grown child. Tell them about how, when, and where you want to make changes. Ask them to hold you accountable for your decisions by posing relevant questions, prompting you in the desired direction, and offering constructive suggestions.*

- *Pray with select members of your team on a regular basis.* Refuse to stay stuck by becoming spiritually isolated. Seek God's life-changing wisdom, help, and direction with your spouse and others, recalling Christ's promise: "When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I'll be there" (Matthew 18:19-20, MSG).