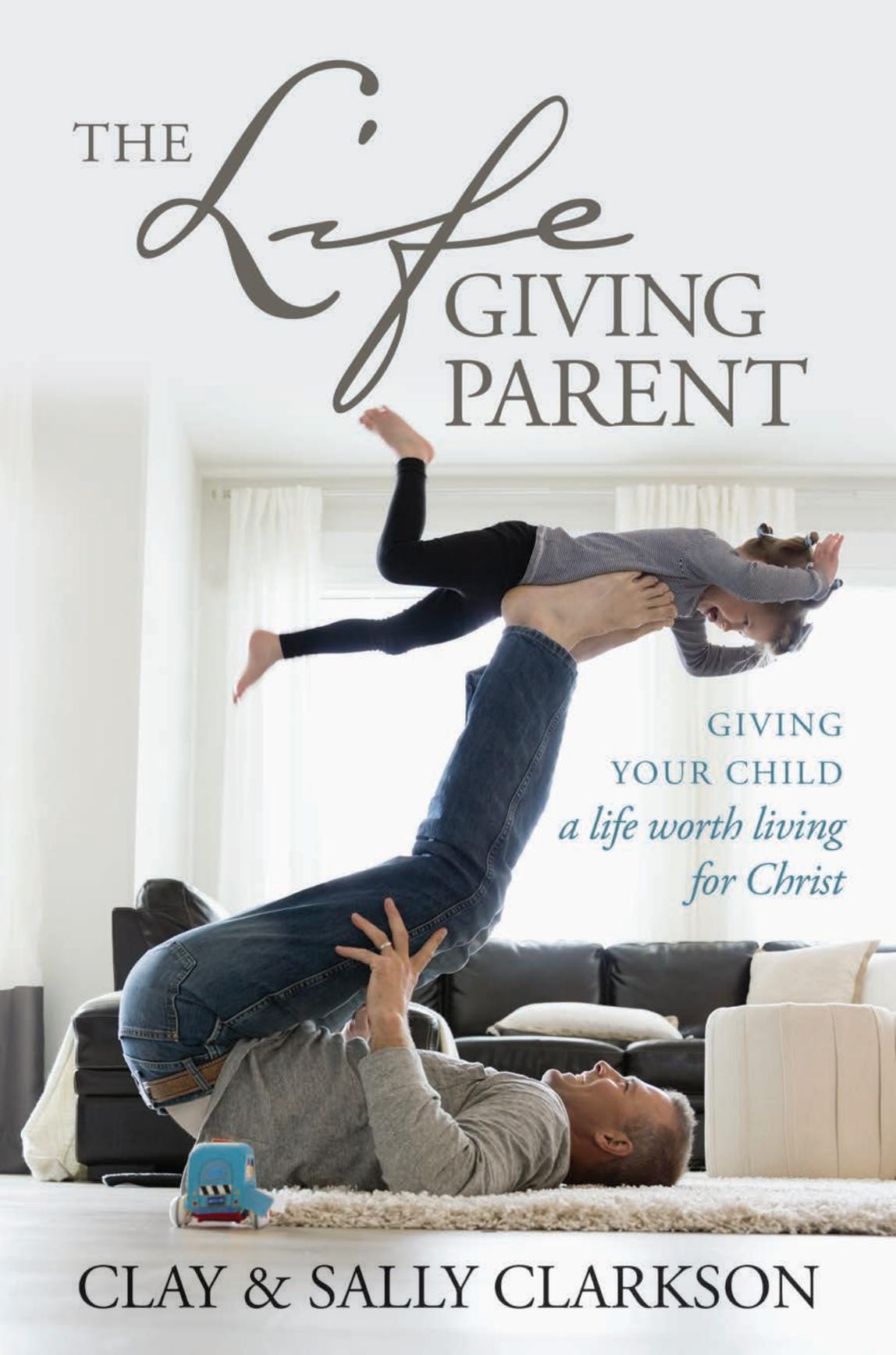


THE *Life* GIVING PARENT



GIVING  
YOUR CHILD  
*a life worth living  
for Christ*

CLAY & SALLY CLARKSON

With biblical wisdom and decades of personal experience, Clay and Sally Clarkson offer families a treasure in *The Lifegiving Parent*. It's a humble yet urgent message to each of us pursuing this messy mission of raising kids to love Jesus and love the world. *We* are the lifegivers. It's not a formula, program, or set of methods. It's a way of life. With God's help, we will pass on what we possess, giving the life of God to our children. No matter what stage of parenting you are in, you will find *The Lifegiving Parent* challenging, helpful, and encouraging.

PATRICK AND RUTH SCHWENK, founders of TheBetterMom.com and ForTheFamily.org and authors of *For Better or for Kids: A Vow to Love Your Spouse with Kids in the House*

With a beautiful balance of biblical teaching, practicality, and an understanding of the challenges parenting brings, Clay and Sally Clarkson's latest endeavor offers thought-provoking insights and reflections on their parenting journey. Moms and dads can mutually benefit from the reminder that passing along the gospel to their children isn't about following a formula but about a parent's authentic relationship with God overflowing into every aspect of family life. Part handbook, part manifesto, this book offers ideas for actionable steps to nurture our children's hearts, warming them to the life-giving love of Christ.

LAURA WIFLER AND EMILY JENSEN, cohosts of the *Risen Motherhood* podcast

Clay and Sally have once again delivered a book that every parent would be wise to read. Inviting and encouraging, this book is a tool kit for passing on an inheritance of following Christ. It's a guide for guides, teeming with wisdom earned from years of navigating the wilderness in search of the Water of Life. For the millions of younger parents longing for wise and practical mentors, *The Lifegiving Parent* is an answer to prayer.

S. D. SMITH, author of The Green Ember series

Parenthood is an incredible gift and an extraordinary journey of discovery. *The Lifegiving Parent* is an inspirational and insightful book for all parents, no matter where they are on the journey. Each chapter is thought provoking and will challenge you as a parent to acknowledge and pursue the God-given role and influence you have in the lives of your children.

JENNIFER SMITH, author of *The Unveiled Wife: Embracing Intimacy with God and Your Husband* and *Thirty-One Prayers for My Husband: Seeing God Move in His Heart*

Wisdom is crammed into these pages—the wisdom of the Scriptures explicated and the wisdom of God embodied in over three decades of parenting. You won't find formulas, guarantees, or glossy depictions of family life in this book. Instead, there are well-worn and well-loved pathways into the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit . . . for parents and for children.

GLENN PACKIAM, associate senior pastor, New Life Church, Colorado Springs, and author of *Discover the Mystery of Faith: How Worship Shapes Believing*

Last year when I was in Colorado for a concert, Clay and Sally Clarkson had me over for dinner. Two of the (grown) Clarkson kids were home at the time, and the family conversation was so rich and the atmosphere so warm that I called my husband that night and told him I had just been invited into something truly remarkable. Now having read *The Lifegiving Parent*, I understand that I was enjoying the fruit of many years of intentional, Spirit-infused cultivation. In their book, the Clarksons openhandedly and systematically share the major tenants of their approach, casting an extraordinary vision of family life while somehow demystifying it at the same time. I am grateful for the generosity poured out by Clay and Sally in these pages, and I will be giving this book to all the parents I know.

CAROLYN ARENDS, recording artist, author, and Renovaré director of education

It's no secret that Clay's and Sally's hearts beat for the family, and now they've offered those heartbeats for us to consider, emulate, and find encouragement from. The Clarksons specialize in inspiring a biblical big-picture mind-set with next-step practicality in a world that often finds parenting burdensome. *The Lifegiving Parent* offers delight and wonder to parents in the trenches.

RUTH CHOU SIMONS, mom of six, founder of GraceLaced.com, artist, and bestselling author of *GraceLaced: Discovering Timeless Truths through Seasons of the Heart*

American parents often say they feel powerless to raise their kids in the best way. Either they feel inadequate to do the job or they worry they don't have the kind of influence on their kids they once dreamed of having. The solution isn't "education" as we typically think of it, nor is it slightly better sermons or youth groups. Children need *formation*—something that's far more broad, intentional, and rooted in the people and traditions that ground a home.

At a time when the plethora of parenting books are mainly focused on technique, Clay and Sally Clarkson provide a vision of parenting as an art. *The Lifegiving Parent* is an intensely practical window into how to be the person your children need so that they can grow up surrounded by the truth, goodness, and beauty that will set them up for a life worth living.

BRIAN BROWN, director, the Anselm Society

My husband and I passed this book back and forth with enthusiasm. *The Lifegiving Parent* is for every hopeful, weary mother or father. Our home is different because of the ministry of Sally and Clay Clarkson. Their vision has lifted our eyes, and this book is a gem we'll return to again and again.

SARA HAGERTY, grateful mother of six and author of *Unseen: The Gift of Being Hidden in a World that Loves to Be Noticed* and *Every Bitter Thing Is Sweet: Tasting the Goodness of God in All Things*

*The Lifegiving Parent* is for parents who want to raise children in a joy-filled home where each person is celebrated and where God is glorified. If parenting feels burdensome and creating a beautiful family culture feels out of reach, this is the book for you.

SARAH MACKENZIE, author of *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids* and host of the *Read-Aloud Revival* podcast

Clay's and Sally's amazing relational styles inspire parents to new heights. They not only tell us "what" but also show us "how." Any parents who read this book will find tools to breathe new life into their homes.

DR. SCOTT TURANSKY, author of *Parenting Is Heart Work* and cofounder of the National Center for Biblical Parenting

Clay and Sally Clarkson are the beloved parenting guides we all seek—gentle yet firm, wise yet adventurous, curious yet convicted. In *The Lifegiving Parent*, the Clarksons faithfully lead us all into a deeper, more meaningful exploration of Christian parenting through personal lessons, biblical insights, and practical teachings. To read this book is to sit down to a treasured mentorship, Yorkshire Tea in hand.

ERIN LOECHNER, blogger at [DesignForMankind.com](http://DesignForMankind.com) and author of *Chasing Slow: Courage to Journey Off the Beaten Path*

There's nothing I want more than to be a life-giving parent to my children. This book is at the top of my go-to stack of books to help me through the beautiful and challenging phases and stages of parenting. You *must* add it to yours.

KRISTEN WELCH, author of the bestselling book *Raising Grateful Kids in an Entitled World: How One Family Learned that Saying No Can Lead to Life's Biggest Yes*

THE *Life* GIVING PARENT

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CLAY & SALLY CLARKSON



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## Foreword

*Sally*

SUMMER EVENINGS IN COLORADO often find us on our back deck as the sun sets behind the foothills of the Rockies. There's something about a cool breeze and gently swaying pine trees that is both rejuvenating and calming at the same time. Dare I say that it feels lifegiving? If so, then perhaps it pictures, just a little, what I hope our children have found in the life of our home and in the gentle breeze of the life of God blowing through it.

Every August, near our wedding anniversary, we gather with our children for our annual Family Day. After a full day of traditional activities, we typically end up sitting around the table on the deck, sipping a variety of beverages and enjoying those lifegiving mountain breezes. We joke and jest, converse and contend, and reminisce and remember. With four thoughtful and opinionated millennial children, there is never (ever!) a letup in the discussion. It's a Clarkson family moment.

After our last Family Day, when Clay and I had some time to be alone, we talked about that table full of blessing and destiny. Solomon was certainly right when he said in Psalm 127 that "children are a gift of the LORD"—our children have been God's gift to us in more ways than we can describe, and they will be God's gift to the

world through us in ways we have yet to know, or perhaps never will know while we're still around. As we thought back together about each child around that table, we realized that in the same way we tried to give life to them in our home while they were growing up, they have given more life to us than we can measure. Lifegiving has been a two-way path.

After thirty-three years of parenting, our four delightful children are all grown and out of the house now (except when they're not). As much as we miss them, it means Clay and I have reached that pivotal parental point of being able to look back and reflect on our parenting journey—all the challenges, choices, chuckles, and changes. Since we're still involved parents to our grown children, we look back not so much with nostalgia as with contemplation. What did we do right? Where did we go wrong? What would we do differently if we could? What have we learned? What can we share with those who come behind us, whether our own children or new generations of parents? This book arose out of discussions like those.

As we talked about the stories and our years of parenting together, we understood that we, like most parents, had little conception when we started the journey what we were doing, and even less what it would require of us. We agreed that parenting was the best of all the ministry we've done in our lives, but we had no idea what that investment in our children would cost us physically, emotionally, spiritually, and financially. It is only now that we can begin to observe the dividends. Whatever lifegiving we did is now paying out in the rich life of faith we see in each of our children.

However, did I also mention the speed bumps, potholes, blind curves, and other road hazards we encountered along the path of parenting? It was not a smooth ride. After all, every Christian family, ours included, is inhabited by sinful, selfish human beings called parents and children. The idea that Christian parenting should be a

purely joyful journey through life is misguided at best and an illusion at worst. And yet, despite our own immaturities and weaknesses, we made it through with no casualties and with faith intact. We're all stronger than when we started.

But Christian parenting is more than just getting from one point to another by faith. We know intuitively we're made for something more than just crossing the finish line. We're made to be part of God's epic story of creation—the story He is writing not only for all of life but for each of our lives. As lifegiving parents, one of our most important tasks has been to help our children discover themselves in the story God is writing, to find their places in the unfolding tale of God's grand purpose and plan and to know that we are all, as a family, in that story together.

As I've partnered with Clay in that bigger picture, it has been my privilege to do my best to be a godly mother to our children—to nurture their faith through my love, grace, discipleship, encouragement, instruction, and inspiration. I have found purpose and meaning in trying to be the kind of mother I believe was in God's heart at creation—a lifegiving mother, one who brings the life of God to my children. I won't pretend it was always a wonderful journey with no difficulties, but the blessings far outweigh the burdens as I see now the influences of my life on each of my children. They are, as God promised, the blessings.

For twenty years, I taught and encouraged Christian mothers in more than sixty Mom Heart Conferences to become that kind of “mother after God's heart.” And there was one question that came up over and over after every event: “Does Clay have a book for dads about what you're teaching that I can give to my husband?” As a gifted teacher and seminary graduate, Clay always wanted to get to that book, but events and ministry administration would never allow enough time to write it. Now that we've retired from regular conference ministry, Clay has finally been able to carve out enough

time to think about this book and write it. *The Lifegiving Parent* is the answer to that question asked by so many moms.

I had already written *The Lifegiving Home* (with our daughter Sarah) and *The Lifegiving Table*, so when Clay suggested the idea of *The Lifegiving Parent*, I was thrilled. It would not only complete a “Lifegiving” trilogy but would also finally provide the book that all those moms for so many years had been asking for—and not just for their husbands but for themselves as well. It pulls together many of the messages we’ve taught through the years into a book that couples can read together to shape a philosophy of how to give their children the life of God in their homes. It’s not just about giving your children a Christian life but also about giving them the life of Christ. That’s what it means to be a lifegiving parent.

If you want to feel that cool breeze of God’s life blowing through your home and family, I pray this book will show you how to make that happen. It’s not a formula but simply a way of life and faith—it’s a lifegiving heart and mind-set. I’m excited for you as you read this book, not just because of what it will do for your family today but also because God’s life coming alive in your home can shape generations to come through your children and their children. Lifegiving parenting will help you and your children to find yourselves in God’s epic story—and to live the story He is writing through and for you.

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## Preface

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*Clay*

SALLY AND I BARELY HAD TURNED the page on our first decade of marriage, and we had moved by faith to Nashville, Tennessee, just the year before. We were still feeling our way forward with three children under eight years old when the “blizzards” hit. They changed our lives.

The first blizzard was a life-threatening miscarriage for Sally. It was a disruptive reminder of the fragility of life and caused us to begin reevaluating our hopes and dreams. The second blizzard was the unexpected loss of a church staff position, forcing us to begin thinking about our future and ministry beyond Nashville. The third was, quite literally, a blizzard—the March 1993 “Storm of the Century” that paralyzed the southeast corner of the country. We had driven to Atlanta for a weekend to speak on parenting, but we ended up immobilized for four days in a small house with other speakers. That blizzard would figuratively blow us out of Tennessee three weeks later to start a new life and ministry in Texas.

Since our marriage ten years before those blizzards, I had completed seminary; we had spent three somewhat-turbulent years in international ministry with a church in Vienna, Austria; and then we had settled into a Southern California church ministry upon our return. Four years later, a church merger and building program

forced a last-in-first-out staff turnover that precipitated our decision to move to Nashville, where I hoped to pitch some songs to Christian publishers. Two years—and minimal song success—later, we were in a snowbound house in Atlanta discussing the question “What would you do if you could do anything?” with other marooned visionary leaders and speakers. And just a few days later, back in Nashville, a neighbor from down the street came to our door and asked if he could buy our house and take possession in two weeks. Life moves fast in a blizzard.

When we turned off the engines of the two large U-Haul trucks two weeks later in front of my family home in rural central Texas, we stepped with trepidation into our answer to the question we’d discussed in Atlanta—if we could, we would start a ministry to help Christian parents raise godly children. That answer was not just a visionary ideal: We had already tried our hand with a parenting workshop in Nashville (maybe a dozen people attended), envisioned starting Family Faith Ministries (it never caught on), and even pitched a parenting book proposal to a major Christian publisher in Nashville (it went nowhere). Despite those three swings and misses, our flailing efforts would become a seed of experience that we would plant in Texas. One year later it would sprout and become Whole Heart Ministries.

Fast-forward twenty-five years. With God’s help, we’ve accomplished our “what would you do if” answer to that blizzard-induced question—built an international ministry to Christian parents; spoken at countless workshops and events; sponsored more than sixty two-day motherhood conferences; written more than twenty parenting books; started an international small-groups ministry for mothers; and built an online ministry reaching tens of thousands. We’re most grateful to have raised four children who now, as adults, love and follow the Lord with a heart for ministry. (You’ll read more about them throughout the book.)

As parents of adult children now, we're slowing down and once more taking stock of our lives for the new journey ahead. If there is a blizzard stirring up that process for us, it's the uncertain winds of time and change (which, of course, are always blowing for everyone, but become more brisk the further along we are on the journey). The question we ask is no longer just what would we do if we could, but also what have we done. What have we learned in twenty-five years of parenting ministry that can help a new generation of moms and dads raise "wholehearted" Christian children? It seems like the right time to revisit the paths, practices, and truths that have defined our ministry over the years—not just the ones that have lasted the longest, but the ones that have become stronger the longer we've walked with them on our journey of Christian parenting.

Sally and Sarah (our oldest child) recently wrote *The Lifegiving Home*, and Sally followed that up with *The Lifegiving Table*. Both books look back on how we worked out what God had worked into our hearts over our years of parenting—and how it affected our children's hearts. The first examines the spiritual influence of home traditions, and the second focuses on the family table. The book you now hold in your hand—*The Lifegiving Parent*—completes a "Lifegiving" trilogy of books that look back into our family experience with a life-colored perspective on what we learned from Scripture, from our children, and from our unusual and unexpected adventures in Christian parenting.

Like Sally's two other "lifegiving" books, *The Lifegiving Parent* is a big-picture overview, not just of what worked pragmatically for us but also of what worked spiritually. It's not your typical book containing primarily how-to and what-to-do parenting wisdom, or a doctrinal survey and commentary of Bible verses on parenting, or a special model of biblical parenting. There's nothing inherently wrong with any of those approaches, all of which are represented in this book, as long as they don't promise unqualified parenting success

if you use them. This book does not. However, at the heart of this book is a fundamental truth I think many Christian parenting books might overlook—the life of God.

This is a book about what Sally and I did to bring God’s life into our home for our children to see and believe. That’s what it means to be a lifegiving parent—to introduce our children to the living God of Scripture and to give them the life that we have found in Him. We offer no special or secret formula that will make you a successful Christian parent, and we would counsel you to avoid any parenting book that does. We offer only our personal experiences and insights, and the promise that God’s grace will be in abundant supply for anything you decide to do by faith in order to become a lifegiving parent for your children. That will be the real story of this book—how God comes alive in your family.

And here’s the rest of my story about this book. As Sally was writing *The Lifegiving Home* and *The Lifegiving Table*, I suggested to her that perhaps I should write a book about lifegiving parenting. After all, it was a good concept, it would make a nice trilogy of books, and it would be an opportunity to summarize the convictions and insights about biblical parenting that had fueled our ministry for a quarter century. But since it was a new concept for me, I would need a strong outline before I could take it to our publisher. I found myself in a deep dive into my research files.

As I slogged through hundreds of pages of old notes, messages, outlines, and documents, I found at the very back of one rarely opened file drawer a manila folder labeled simply “Book Proposal.” I opened it and quickly realized what I had found—it was the filed-away and forgotten book proposal dating from that year of blizzards in Nashville. My very first (and not very good) book proposal. Perhaps I should not have been surprised at the working title of that first book concept, but I was momentarily stunned when I saw “The Lifegiving Parent.” I had absolutely no recollection of it having ever

been a book I had conceived, much less proposed, but there it was, pushing its way back into the present, inviting itself back into my mind after all these years.

As I read the twenty-five-year-old outline, I was taken aback that the concepts it expressed were ones we are still teaching and championing today. We're more confident and have much more to say now—the maturity that comes from both success and failure has added breadth and depth to our early ideas and ideals—but the path of parenting we started on is the same path we're still on. We've changed and grown, but the truths of God's Word and His wisdom for parents have stayed the same. You might say the past is always present for God. It took only a short time to edit that early outline, expand and craft its formative ideas, and turn it into a new proposal for this book.

Perhaps this brief backstory will remind you that divine truths, though they may be hidden by time and circumstances, don't really change—they are simply waiting to be found and appreciated again, maybe even leaving us a little stunned that we ever forgot or overlooked them in the first place. In this book, I hope to uncover some of those truths about bringing the life of God into our homes, discovering their surprising currency for our parenting today. After all, God has revealed Himself to us as a heavenly parent, so some concepts of parenting are not only taught in His Word but are also eternal and implanted in our own spirits by the image of God that we bear. It is my hope that this book will invite those parenting truths into your present, to resonate with your heart and come alive in your home.

The goal of this book is very simple: to inspire and encourage you to become a lifegiving parent who invites the living God of eternity into your home and family. In chapter 1, we'll look at the countercultural nature of lifegiving parenting and the critical importance of imparting God's life to our children. In chapters 2–9, we'll look at eight specific “Heartbeats of Parental Lifegiving” that

characterize the ways we can bring God's life into our homes to give to our children. Our family's stories and insights will provide illustrative stepping-stones, and selected Bible passages will provide divine directions for moving forward. Each heartbeat chapter will end with one of "Sally's Lifegiving Momoirs," a personal story from her parenting journey as a mother; "Lifegiving ParenTips," three personal and practical ways to respond to each heartbeat; and "Starting the Heartbeat of Parental Lifegiving," a one-sentence recap of the chapter's message along with an action step you can take to implement lifegiving parenting. In chapter 10, we'll look ahead to the end of the journey to find motivation for becoming a lifegiving parent. We all have only "one life to give" for our children, so we need to make sure it's one that will indeed give them life. Finally, the epilogue will provide a brief look into "Our Lifegiving Parent Story," a glance at where our parenting journey has taken Sally and me and our children in this life with God.

Sally and I hope that the concept of lifegiving parenting can be a parental paradigm shift for you, a new way of thinking about raising your children to know and follow Christ. Our prayer is that rather than being overwhelmed, you will sense a new freedom by discovering a different way of life at home with your children. As you read each chapter, please don't get hung up on the specifics of what we did or what you need to accomplish in your home. At its core, lifegiving parenting is less about what you do and more about who you are—a child of the living God who is connected with Him and is ready to share that life with your children so that they may know Him too.

What we share in this book has grown out of our own story, but it can also become the words and ways that will help you write your own story—the story of a Christian home alive with the life of God, the story of children finding their lives in the God they see and experience there through the faith of their parents, and the story of faith and hope in the God of life that—because of you—will go from your

home into the world and into future generations. No matter what your family looks like, what you've done, where you've come from, or where you are in life right now, you can become a lifegiving parent. You can learn to bring the life of God into your home, to give His life to your children, and to find even more of His life for yourself in the process. It's not a foolproof formula to follow; it's a life of faith to live and to give. Join us on the journey of becoming a lifegiving parent.



# SOMEONE'S GOT TO GIVE



*Thus says the LORD, "Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you will find rest for your souls."*

JEREMIAH 6:16

FAMILY IS CHANGING. Anyone who has lived through the last few decades of American life has watched that change move like a prairie storm across the landscape of our culture—sometimes slowly, sometimes swiftly, but always with steady, inevitable progress. Nothing is quite the same in the wake of a cultural storm's winds and rains. When it hits where you live, change happens. And it's happening now to home and family.

If a movie can be like a parable of Jesus, I'd have to suggest that the 1939 classic *The Wizard of Oz* comes close as a cinematic parable of our current experience. The movie begins in black and white, with young Dorothy Gale living a simple life anchored in the abiding fundamentals of family and faithfulness and surrounded by the unchanging stability of the Kansas prairie. But then a raging cyclone transports her farmhouse—with Dorothy and her little black dog, Toto, inside—to

a new and unfamiliar, but very colorful, place. As she wanders along a yellow-bricked path outside her relocated house, taking in the strangeness of all she is seeing in the yet-unnamed Land of Oz, she voices the obvious: “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

Over the last generation, a storm has blown across our Christian cultural landscape with the ferocity of a Kansas tornado. It picked up our values of home and family and carried them and us to a new place that is strange and unsettling. Like Dorothy, we’re wandering along a well-trodden path to the Great and Mighty One, trying to make sense of the new world we see around us. And in our hearts, despite the changes we’re experiencing, we still believe, like Dorothy, “There’s no place like home.”

Change is a reality of life that we can resist but can’t avoid. And yet while things are changing all around us, the *kinds* of changes we see—the big, global changes that we call human progress—remain the same from generation to generation. Solomon, as king of Israel, changed that land like no one before him or since—he built the Temple, enlarged its treasures, made Israel a nation among nations, and transformed Jerusalem into a world-class city. And yet he wrote in Ecclesiastes 1:9, “That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun.” Solomon was enlarging his domain and influence as countless other kingdoms and governments have done. The details may differ, but we as humans keep doing the same things, in the same ways, with the same good—and bad—intentions and outcomes. That’s the paradox, and in part the message of Ecclesiastes: The world changes, but humans remain the same.

We’re naturally fascinated by the big, culture-defining changes of the kind that Solomon ushered in for Israel—changes in society, industry, commerce, education, governance, technology, fashion, leisure, and other areas. But most of us, as believers in Jesus and His teachings, don’t really change inside when things change around

us—we still want the fundamental human values and virtues we believe in to remain the same. Whatever else is changing, we expect foundational biblical truths to stay firm. It's an article of our faith. But now that's being challenged too.



The cultural changes we're seeing in our current time “under the sun,” not just in matters of home and family but also in attitudes toward Christian truth and morality, are of the fundamental kind, the ones we couldn't or didn't want to see coming but that now we cannot avoid—shifting attitudes about sexuality and marriage, the prevalence of divorce and fragmentation of families, conflicting ideas about God, challenges to the Bible's authority, rejection of once widely held Christian standards and beliefs. We're seeing increasingly dramatic confrontations over some of God's foundational “solid rock” truths that provide stability and safety from the storms of life. Even though we as believers are building our homes “on the rock” of Jesus' words, more and more homes built “on the sand” surround us and are vulnerable to the storms (see Matthew 7:24-27). Sandy foundations for many are being eroded and washed away.

David asks in one of his psalms, “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (11:3). It's a good question. What happens when the foundations change? What is our response when our fundamental values are no longer honored? What do we do when the foundations we live by are rejected by those around us, or even by our country? Or when rulers over us do not affirm or protect our cherished ways of life as Christians? As a psalmist of Israel, David's answer was a simple reminder of what followers of God have always known to do—to trust God because He reigns from His temple in heaven and will protect the righteous (see 11:4, 7). As king of Israel, though, David could not foresee what his question perhaps presciently foreshadowed for the future of his country.

About four hundred years after David's reign as God's king over all Israel, the ancient foundations of the Promised Land, already split into two kingdoms, were being further decimated—the northern kingdom of Israel had already been conquered and scattered by Assyria, and the southern kingdom of Judah (the land of Jerusalem and the Temple) was less than a decade from being overthrown and exiled to Babylon for seventy years. In the midst of all that change and many prophecies of coming judgment, God offered an indirect answer to David's Psalm 11:3 question through Jeremiah, a prophet to Judah: "Thus says the LORD, 'Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you will find rest for your souls'" (Jeremiah 6:16).

When the foundations and fundamentals of Christianity that have provided stability for us for so long are rocked by challenge and change, and Kansas seems like a distant memory, the answer is not to panic, or fight, or just give up. The answer is, in fact, to be like Dorothy in Oz—to adjust and adapt, keep going, keep believing, and never give up the vision of home. The biblical answer to David's question, and to ours, is to trust that the God we know is faithful and the ancient paths we know are good. In other words, when things are changing around us, we stay faithful and stay the course. In that path alone we'll find peace in the midst of conflict.

Whatever else we may do in response to the changes happening around us, the one thing we cannot do is neglect our families. The eight heartbeats of lifegiving parenting covered in chapters 2–9 are an attempt to define, at least in part, what "the good way" will be for serious Christian families to walk in as we navigate through our uncertain time "under the sun." It's not just about being a "good Christian family" as a testimony to the world, or about combating the growing decline of the biblical family in our culture. It's about something much more important—it's about bringing your children into contact with the living God whom you serve so they will want

to serve Him too. It's about your children finding life in God so they can stay faithful to the faith you pass on to them.



In the same way that the nation of Israel changed dramatically over its first four hundred years, so have American culture and Christianity. The purpose of this book is not to address those changes, and it is especially not to try to redress them. Instead, I want to speak to Christian families who are committed to building the kind of homes that can withstand the storms of culture blowing in with those changes—the kind of lifegiving homes Jesus said are built on the rock of His Word (see Matthew 7:24-27).

Lifegiving parenting is not about changing the culture we live in but about being a counterculture to it. It's not about creating a comfortable Christian subculture insulated from the surrounding world; rather, it's about being the kind of lifegiving home culture that will stand as a testimony of God's biblical design for family to a lost world whose sandy foundations are washing away. It's not about being a political or social "culture warrior" for the family but about definitively, and maybe even defiantly, building a home where the living God of Creation is undeniably living through the family within it. Lifegiving parenting is about bringing the life of God into your home and family to create, with Him, an outpost of the Kingdom of Heaven in this world. We can call that place a "Christian home," but Christians often have very different ideas of what those words mean.

Throughout the quarter century of what I call our Christian home and parenting ministry, we've met and seen many families with life-affirming and life-infused Christian homes, where the presence of God was unmistakable in the parents' vision for their biblical roles and in the spiritual homelife they were cultivating for their children. However, we've also observed many American Christian families where the parents, though unquestionably believers, seemed minimally engaged

in the spiritual life of the home or their children. If asked to give a reason why theirs was a Christian home, they might answer by focusing mostly on what their children were doing—“My kids go to church, Sunday School, Bible club, youth group, and camp; have all the best Christian music, videos, books, and apps; attend a Christian school; go to VBS and Christian activities; and have great Christian friends. Of course they’re being raised in a Christian home.”

There’s no question that exposing children to so many good and godly Christian influences can be a positive thing. However, it can also become a negative thing if Christian consumerism becomes either an unintentional or preferred substitute for the life of God in a family. We need to distinguish between a home that is considered Christian primarily because cultural Christianity happens there and a home that is Christian because Christ is alive and present in perceptible ways. Here’s the reality that needs to be affirmed: A distinctively Christian home can never be defined only by what the children are doing; it must be defined by what the parents are doing.

Despite what the pervasive Christian culture many of us live in may lead you to believe, no amount of Christian activities, materials, or media for your children will be able to make your home a Christian home. Those can all be good, edifying, enjoyable, and fun for your family, but they are powerless in themselves to bring the life of God into your home. Only you—parents alive in Christ because of the Holy Spirit within you—have the ability and the power of the Spirit to make your home a Christian home. Engagement with Christian culture does not define a Christian home; engagement with the living Christ does. That understanding is a necessary first step on the path to becoming a lifegiving parent.



This is where authors often cite statistics to bolster their arguments. However, while statistics can legitimately tell a story that engages our

minds and hearts, they can also be misused to portray a crisis that we need to fear. Data can be misinterpreted or misunderstood. For example, during the 2000s, many Christian parents were confronted with shockingly dire statistics about Christian youth abandoning the church and their faith as they entered college and early adulthood. Some youth ministries used those statistics to convince parents of the critical need for their programs. Those “scare-tistics” were sometimes exaggerated and misquoted and were later challenged by better research and data, but there was no way to undo their impact.

But here’s a different kind of statistical story, a better one that captures our hearts and minds without fear. For nearly forty years, Vern Bengtson and his colleagues conducted a multigenerational study of religion and family—the largest such study ever done. It followed 350 extended families representing more than 3,500 individuals whose birth dates spanned more than a century. In his book about the study, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations*, Bengtson’s top three conclusions tell a better story: “Religious families are surprisingly successful at transmission. . . . Parental influence has not declined since the 1970s. . . . Parental warmth is the key to successful transmission.”<sup>1</sup>

The real story that parents need to hear in these times is that in spite of the season of epic change in which we find ourselves, the fundamentals of faith transmission and retention within families have not really changed. Even though we’re going through yet another generational transition, with new technologies and mobile communication radically reshaping the cultural landscape in which our children and youth will grow up and find their way, the research confirms that faith is still passed along in families the same way as it always has been—through parents. And Bengtson’s conclusions are remarkably consistent with a 3,500-year-old biblical model that still works for passing faith from one generation to the next. The story of that “statistic” should engage your heart and mind.



Perhaps you've heard the term *shema*, but you don't know where it's from or what it means. You're probably not alone. It's simply the Hebrew word for "hear," but it is the first word of what Jews consider the most important passage of Holy Scripture. The verses are called the Shema and have been recited twice daily (at morning and evening prayers) by pious Jews since they were first spoken by Moses:

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!  
 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and  
 with all your soul and with all your might. These words,  
 which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart.  
 You shall teach them diligently to your sons 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 up.  
 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall  
 be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on  
 the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9

There are other important passages for Jews, and the full Shema includes two additional passages (Deuteronomy 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41), but this initial passage of the Shema Yisra'el ("Hear, O Israel") has given Jews an identity as a people who name the Lord as their God (vv. 4-5), who tell their children about their God (v. 7), and who make their God a part of their lives and homes (vv. 8-9). Throughout the storied history of the Jews, the Shema has held them together.

It helps to remember the stories that lead up to this passage. After the flood of Noah, the story of the people and nation of Israel begins with God's call to Abraham (then called Abram) to leave the land

of Ur, and His promise to give him a land and raise up a people from his seed. Abraham's late-in-life son, Isaac, has a son, Jacob, who wrestles with God and is given the name Israel. He has twelve sons who eventually become patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel, which are named after them. At age seventeen, the youngest son, Joseph, is sold by his jealous brothers into slavery in Egypt. Joseph rises from prisoner to prominence in Egypt and saves his family from famine by moving them there from Canaan.

Though Joseph saves his family, their move to Egypt results in four hundred years of captivity for the rapidly multiplying Hebrew people, forced to serve as slaves to the Egyptians. Their exile ends when God raises up Moses to free His people from slavery. The Israelites pass through the parted Red Sea and receive at Mount Sinai the Law they would need to become a nation, but then they succumb to fear and unbelief and fail to enter the Promised Land. After wandering for forty years in the wilderness, Moses and the people finally come to the Jordan River and look across into the land God promised their forefather Abraham five hundred years earlier. They are finally about to become a nation.

Now imagine what Moses is thinking. He knows he will not be able to cross the Jordan to enter the Promised Land (see Numbers 20:8-12), and he knows his visionary leadership of the people will pass to his faithful aide, Joshua, a military man of action. On the east side of the river, Moses has gathered all the people together to encourage them and remind them of who they are—not escaped slaves from Egypt but the children of Abraham and the people of God. He wants to remind them of all that God has done to bring them to this point, read the Law that God gave him on Mount Sinai, and prepare them to become a nation.

In his 120 years of living, Moses has been many men: a prince of Egypt in Pharaoh's house; the runaway Hebrew slave who became a shepherd, husband, and father in Midian; the reluctant leader

God speaks to from the burning bush, calling him to set His people free; the returned leader of the Hebrews who would, through God's might, neutralize the vast power of Egypt with ten plagues and lead His people to freedom; the divider of the Red Sea; and the receiver of the Ten Commandments and the Law directly from God. Moses is feeling the weight of all that history and the responsibility he has carried so long for this people. Every word he speaks will be critical. This is his last opportunity to teach them "the commandment, the statutes and the judgments which the LORD your God has commanded" (Deuteronomy 6:1). This is his last time to set their courses for the future before they enter the Promised Land.

Moses addresses the assembled tribes of Israel not just as individuals but also as families—"so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the LORD your God" (v. 2). Implicit in his address is his conviction that the family will be key to the future survival and success of the nation of Israel. In the season of epic change that Israel is about to endure, Moses doubles down on the fundamentals—worship only God (v. 4), love God completely (v. 5), learn God's commandments (v. 6), teach them to your children (v. 7), and keep God alive in your home (vv. 8-9).

First, Moses proclaims that the Lord will be the Israelites' God. Other Canaanite and pagan nations surrounding them will have their Baals and other false gods, usually many of them, but the Lord is the one true God, and the Israelites are to worship Him alone, keeping the first of the Ten Commandments—"You shall have no other gods before Me" (5:7). Then Moses exhorts them that they are to love the Lord their God with all their hearts, souls, and might—totally, without reservation, with pure and complete trust, with their entire being. Jesus would consider the combination of these first two statements of belief and devotion to be the great and foremost commandment of the Law (see Matthew 22:36-38). It is important to remember that Moses has just indicated (6:2-3) that he is directing

his words especially to parents, so this part of the Shema is also arguably the starting point for all good parenting, whether 3,500 years ago or today. *Christian* parenting, then, must also start with the Lord, the one God we believe in and love with all that we are, who was incarnated for us in Jesus, our Savior.

Next, Moses tells the Israelites that all the commandments he is teaching them (“these words”) are to be first on their hearts. It’s not just about mental assent or head knowledge but is also about assimilating his teaching so that it will change their very beings. And then he specifically addresses the parents again, telling them they are to teach what is now on their hearts to their children (“sons”) and that teaching is not to be done passively and casually but actively and “diligently.” He uses a word that means “to whet, or sharpen,” suggesting that the Hebrew parents were to sharpen their children’s hearts with God’s commandments and truth. And what cannot be missed here is the truth Moses is declaring for every parent from then until now: You cannot put into your children’s hearts what is not first in your own heart, and it will only get there through an active and purposeful relationship with God. You are the key—truth transmission begins in your heart.

Finally, Moses turns to the family, suggesting that what happens in parents’ and children’s hearts must also be reflected in the life of the home. He uses Hebrew parallelisms—opposites that indicate a whole—to make a clear statement about the kind of relationship that will pass along faith and truth from parents to children. The diligent teaching he says must happen cannot occur only when the place and time are convenient; it is to happen everywhere (“when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way”) and all the time (“when you lie down and when you rise up”). In other words, there is no place and no time when teaching children about God should not be happening. Then Moses exhorts them that the words of God must be so clearly a part of their lives that it would be as though they were

wearing them on their bodies and displaying them on their dwellings. (While these verses sound like literal commands, other verses suggest a figurative sense to these teachings.) For parents of any era, the truth is clear—what goes into the heart must come out in a life. If we want to be lifegiving parents, there should be no question that God is alive in our hearts and homes.



Why spend so much time on this ancient statement of faith for Israel? It's 3,500 years old! Why is it important for us now, in the midst of our season of fundamental changes? How does an ancient text relate to the idea of lifegiving parenting? Second-century apologist, theologian, and bishop Irenaeus of Lyons (France) has something to say about that: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God." Despite the seeming circularity of his statement, Irenaeus is saying simply that we will become the "fully alive" people God designed us to be only by engaging with the living God. To put it another way, real life is found only in the life of God. That is, essentially, what I believe Moses was saying to parents in the Shema—real life is found only in God, and the life of God in our hearts must be diligently passed on to our children's hearts. Godly parenting is heart to heart, but it's also more—it's life to life. That's the relational heart of lifegiving parenting.

But don't miss a hidden-in-plain-sight truth: If lifegiving parenting is about giving our children real life in God so they can be fully alive in Him, then . . . *someone's got to give*. That transfer of the life of God to our children does not happen just by good intent or by accident. It happens for one reason only—because we decide that *we* are the people who've got to give. Not another person, group, or church; not an organization, resource, or influence . . . just us. We are the lifegivers. We are the ones who will give the life of God to our children. When we can get our heads, hearts, and hands firmly

around that reality, then we'll be on the path to becoming the life-giving parents God designed us to be.



Comments about the life of God permeate all of Scripture. It is, after all, the “living and active” Word of God (Hebrews 4:12), given life by the living God who gave it to us. In Genesis, “the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (2:7). David wrote, “For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light” (Psalm 36:9). In the first words of his Gospel, mirroring the first words of Genesis, John says of Jesus, who is God incarnate, “In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men” (John 1:4). Paul says that Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10).

As you can see, in many passages throughout Scripture about the life of God, the light of God also shines. The first words of God are “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3), for without light there is no life. David says, “The LORD is my light and my salvation” (Psalm 27:1), the One who saves his life. Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, proclaimed, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life” (John 8:12). In his first epistle, John says, “God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Paul admonishes believers, “At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light” (Ephesians 5:8, ESV).

So when we give our children God's life, we are also giving them His light. It is the light of God that will shine in our hearts and our homes so that we can be a beacon of hope to the world around us. From a personal perspective as parents who love our children, life-giving parenting must first be about helping them find eternal life in Christ and getting them on God's path so they can live in a way that's

pleasing to Him. That is certainly the priority of lifegiving parenting. But it is also so much more than that.

On a much grander scale, lifegiving parenting is about becoming a part of the epic story of God breaking into our dark and dying world to bring light and life. It is about writing ourselves and our children into the overarching story of God's eternal plan, "giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Colossians 1:12-13). His life and light are what make us "the light of the world" so that we can "shine before men in such a way that they may see [our] good works, and glorify [our] Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14, 16). We're turning on that light in our homes so others who are overcome by darkness and death may see it and find the life and freedom in Christ that we have found.

Lifegiving parenting is not a program to implement in your home or a set of principles and practices to say and do. It's not a formula, a ritual, or a set of rules. It is a way of living. From one perspective, it is like building and cultivating a Christian home—creating a structure and atmosphere in which the Spirit of God can work to bring the life of God to you, and through you to your children. To consider how the life of God gets into your home, I think it might be helpful to consider an illustration about a house, which has only a limited number of openings where things can come in.

The primary way the life of God gets into your home is through doors. There are numerous symbolic doors in Scripture, especially in the New Testament—doors of faith, judgment, and opportunity. Jesus calls Himself "the door" to salvation (John 10:9). But perhaps the most picturesque door is in Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me." Jesus is speaking to "those whom I love" (v. 19), asking if He can come in

and sit down at their table with them to eat. As parents, you want to be sure that door is open in your home. It is, of course, the door to eternal life in Christ, but it is also the door to welcome the love of God in the person of Christ. Remember, too, that Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). So keep your door open for others whom He loves and who love Him; they will bring Christ’s life in with them. Lifegiving parents open the door of their homes to Christ and His followers to let the love of God in.

Another obvious way the life of God gets into your home is through windows. We don’t think of windows as entries, like doors, but their purpose is no less important: Windows let in light. Thinking about our symbolic home, windows let in the light of God—His truth, grace, wisdom, hope, love, joy, peace, forgiveness, mercy, help, and so much more. Windows are where the light of God’s Word enters your home as a lamp to your feet and a light to your path (see Psalm 119:105). A window lets in the light of God that “has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). The more windows you have in your home—family devotions and prayers, short and long Bible readings, Scripture verses on the walls, Bibles in easy reach, talking about God at meals, sharing testimonies of His grace and help—the more the light of God can shine in. Lifegiving parents open the windows of their homes to let the light of God in.

A final way the life of God gets into your home is not quite so obvious—through vents. We don’t often think about vents, but they are critical to a healthy home. In a modern home, vents work two ways—they help bring fresh, new air into a house, and they also take stale, old air out. We were reminded of the importance of vents when we had a whole-house fan that burned out twice because, as we finally learned, we didn’t have enough ventilation in the attic. In our symbolic home, vents are how the life of God through the Holy

Spirit can fill your dwelling. The Greek word for “Spirit” (*pneuma*) means “breath” or “wind,” and Jesus compares the Holy Spirit to wind when describing those who are “born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Ventilation is all about the Spirit—trusting in His presence, living by faith, relying on His power, reading Scripture with His guidance, worshiping God in Spirit, asking for His wisdom. We don’t often “see” the work of the Spirit, but we know it is real. He brings His new life to our spirits and removes the old life. Lifegiving parents open the vents of their homes to let the life of God in.

If you want to get to the beating heart of being a lifegiving parent, you’ll find it in opening your home to the love of God, the light of God, and the life of God. If you faithfully keep the symbolic door, windows, and vents of your home open, then your house will be full of God’s love, light, and life. Lifegiving parenting is all about creating a home for your children that is loving, enlightened, and alive with the presence and life of God.



As I said above but need to say again, lifegiving parenting is not a formula, program, or set of rules to follow. That’s not how life happens. It’s simply about inviting Jesus into your home to eat at your table and be with you; pulling back any curtains of bad habits, sin, or laziness to let as much of the light of God into your home every day as you can; and opening and cleaning all the vents so the Holy Spirit can breathe and fill up the airspace of your home with His presence.

This book is an invitation to start living like a lifegiving parent. In the chapters that follow, I’ll talk about eight “heartbeats” of lifegiving parenting—the kinds of biblical patterns and priorities that can help bring the life of God into your home in ways that your children can see and know are real. However, let me offer a quick disclaimer here.

This book is not a theology of parenting. Each heartbeat grows out of direct or indirect parenting passages from Scripture that I have long studied, taught, and written about. Still, the eight heartbeats are not a comprehensive biblical presentation, and others could certainly be added. The ones here, though, work together to form a complete, holistic biblical idea. You can be confident that what's covered in this book will put you on the path to becoming a lifegiving parent.

The reality is that Scripture does not provide a systematic doctrine of child raising. Instead, what we have is partial, anecdotal, and somewhat random. There are enough biblical cues and clues to discern what God wants us to know about parenting, but from my study it seems clear that He has purposely left the subject incomplete—He leaves it to our discretion to take the pieces He provides and make the whole. Why? I believe He doesn't want us enslaved by conformity to only one "right way" of child raising; he wants us free in Christ to parent in the power of the Holy Spirit by faith. Faith and freedom should be the nature of our life in the Spirit, and it should be the nature of our life at home as parents.

Perhaps you're continuing a journey you're already on and are just looking for new parenting ideas. Perhaps you're stepping onto the path of lifegiving parenting for the first time, looking for God's direction for your home. Or perhaps you're considering a new paradigm for your Christian home—moving from a legalistic model of form and function to a lifegiving model of faith and freedom. However you come to lifegiving parenting, and whatever it leads you to do in your home, keep Paul's admonition in mind: "The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17, NIV). You're free in God's Spirit to discover what is right for your home.

The world is changing around you, but it doesn't need to change you. The fundamentals of biblical parenting are the rock on which

God invites you to build your home, the foundation that will keep it safe and standing against the rains, floods, and winds of the cultural storms of change. As it was true for Dorothy, it's true for you, too—there's no place like home. As you begin the journey of lifegiving parenting, the Spirit will make sure of that.