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## *Chapter One*



# AND THERE CAME A LION

**W**e've had so much fun with you the past three weeks," Charlie said to his children before getting out of the car. "I'll miss seeing you every day, but I know Mom is waiting for you. Remember—I love you. We'll talk soon."

"See you in two weeks," they chimed. One by one they hugged us both good-bye and ran to Mom's open arms.

We left, reminiscing over the good times we had shared with our blended family. Our first extended visitation had gone better than we expected. The next two weeks passed quickly. We arrived at the door ready to pick up the children.

This time something was different. It was unusually quiet. The children ordinarily ran out to meet us, but there was no sight of them. We rang the doorbell—but no one answered. We saw a real estate sign on the front lawn. The sign in itself wasn't alarming, but we still wondered why no one was home. This was very peculiar. Charlie and I peered through the windows.

"There's no furniture!" I said in alarm. "Nothing is left!"

“Oh no! She’s taken them!” Charlie’s voice rose in panic. “My children are gone! How will I find them?”

Minds reeling, hearts pounding, we hurried back to our house. Charlie began a series of frantic phone calls in an attempt to find some answers. He called every friend or acquaintance of his ex-wife that he could think of. He called the neighbors and the parents of the children’s schoolmates. He even contacted the real estate agency that listed the house. It was fruitless. Those who knew where she had moved were not going to betray her confidence, and she had covered her tracks well. She had left no forwarding telephone number or change of address.

We did discover that the house had been sold nearly a month before, giving ample time for the children and their mother to be *anywhere*. It occurred to us that when we took Grace, Charles, and Sabrina back after our last visitation they had probably returned to an empty house and left town the same day. But now, two weeks later, there were no leads as to where the children were living.

At the time we were married, my husband’s ex-wife had custody of their three children, ages nine, seven, and five. The court granted Charlie a visitation schedule. My two children, eight and six years old, lived with us and regularly visited their birth father. These were typical judicial decisions of the early 1970s, where the mother was most often given custody of the children and the father received visitation privileges void of custodial rights, yet full of financial responsibility. Joint custody wasn’t common practice.

A blended home involves so much adjustment. We didn’t have a clue the effort it would require to feel like one family instead of two single-parent families. Yet, despite these new challenges, the children, Charlie, and I were learning how to cope with visitation schedules and the unforeseen realities of family life when this startling change was thrust upon us. Charlie plummeted to the brink of desperation.

“Do you really think you should have another drink?” I ventured as he reached for the bottle of whiskey sitting beside the kitchen sink.

“I know what I’m doing. Do we have any more cherries?”

“No. I’m sorry. Guess we ran out,” I said, with a growing concern for the rest of our evening together. “You know that won’t really make anything better. You’ve already had three.”

“Just leave me alone,” Charlie said, agitation growing in his voice. Lifting the glass to his lips, he sullenly walked to the stereo and began playing (for the hundredth time) *My Way*. I grew to hate that song.

We were devastated by the children’s disappearance. Our emotions took an incredible downward spiral into mourning, fear, and extreme frustration. Every waking hour was consumed with the thought of locating the children . . . or the dread that we might not be able to.

I felt like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*—suddenly transported to a world I knew nothing about. Lions and tigers and bears were everywhere. How could I find the yellow brick road? I knew I wouldn’t wake up like Dorothy and find out it was only a bad dream. This was a nightmare not limited to the darkness. Its length could not be known. Morning’s light would not take away its fears.

I had no ability as a private detective and no training helpful to sort through my husband’s incredible anger and mood swings. I felt trapped. How could our newly formed family survive such a devastating crisis? Blending our families was now a moot issue. We were consumed with the circumstances and emotions surrounding the loss of the children. Charles Swindoll, in his book *Active Spirituality*, describes well the tone of our home those days.

For many folks, the struggle to keep things in balance is not an annual conflict, but more like a daily struggle. . . . When things are adverse, life gets simple; survival becomes our primary goal. Adversity is a test on our resiliency, our creativity. Up against it, we reach down deep into our inner character and we “gut it out.”<sup>1</sup>

These were truly days filled with tests of our resiliency. Bouncing back was getting harder and harder. Each day we grasped for new creativity that would lead to answers, and each dead end was

a drain on our emotions. Each morning was a new challenge threatening our family's survival. By bedtime, exhaustion from the constant concern for the missing children overtook me—the continual lack of time and energy for healthy interaction with my two children and maintaining our marriage was taking its toll. We were drowning. Who would throw us a lifeline?

### A DISCOVERY

I realize that for many this particular heartache lasts for years. Perhaps it never ends. Today, many parents are kidnapping their own children in the aftermath of divorce. The anguish is overwhelming for the parent left behind and frightening for the children who are taken into a world of hide-and-seek, often told to change their names for fear of being found.

Jane Pauley reported the amazing story of Barbara Kurth and her missing daughters on *Dateline NBC* in May of 1998.

It was a story that made headlines across the country—18 years after two little girls had disappeared, they were found. For all those years, they believed their mother to be dead. Now they know the truth, that their father had lied about that. He'd been lying about a lot of things over the years. Accused of kidnapping now, he says it's just a story about a father's love. What about the mother?<sup>22</sup>

As the documentary unfolded, we learned of a father who had brazenly orchestrated an ingenious plot. He simply didn't return his children from their weekend visitation. Within days, he had set up an entirely new identity for himself and the girls. A new city and new names. Their mother's searching, and even money spent on private detectives, was to no avail. Even more devastating to Barbara was the way her ex-husband succeeded in motivating the girls to want no relationship with her. He led them to believe that his deception (rather than a kidnapping, he labeled it a rescue) was for their ultimate good. So even after Barbara found her daughters, she didn't find consolation.

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Urged on by the aftermath of unresolved conflicts, divorced moms and dads throughout our culture devise ways to avoid contact with an ex-spouse and maintain a controlling interest in the children's lives. One parent is willing to live on the run, even risk years in jail, to avoid the influence of the other birth parent in the lives of their children. This ploy will never remove the estranged parent from the child's thoughts—which is precisely why Barbara's husband took his deception to a higher level, creating a dead mother in the minds of his girls. Through this particular lie he found a way of settling the issue—of guaranteeing his daughters wouldn't look for their mother.

## TRUTH AND TRUST

Proverbs 22:6 tells us to train up our children in the way they should go. God admonishes us to give our youngsters a wholesome standard to follow. For me, that means a truthful model. We cannot do that unless we live it ourselves. The truth must be an important factor to the parent before the child will value the concept. If we live a lie we teach a lie. Barbara Kurth's former husband construed a network of lies for his children to live with. Today those lies are being exposed. There will be many feelings for the girls to sort through in the years ahead.

Trust is a precious thing to violate. Truth may not always be easy to accept, but living on the basis of truth develops a perception of life based on how things really are. Maybe things aren't perfect, but at least you're dealing with reality. Living truthfully improves mutual trust. A life of changing identities is a life of fear and uncertainty and traumatizes our children. The parent who lives a lie places himself in a house of cards. No one benefits when it tumbles.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. (Ephesians 4:25)

Because you are a Christian, your life ought to be permeated with truth. When you were born again, God put the spirit of truth in

you. ([see] John 16:13). The Spirit's role is to guide you into all truth. . . . If you allow the Spirit to fill you with God's truth, you will be truthful in your actions and in your relationships.<sup>3</sup>

## A REBUFF

We know we are one of the fortunate families. We finally located our children. Several months after we drove up to that empty house, and after digging daily for clues and following deductive thinking and gut instincts, we finally hit pay dirt. For whatever reason, God allowed us to make a discovery.

Using the name of the children's stepfather, we learned that they were enrolled in a school three hundred miles north of our home. They lived in the same neighborhood and near a couple we had previously contacted in our desperate search for answers. That couple had repeatedly lied to us and was a party to the mother's successful disappearance with the children. By now we knew we could not trust others with our newfound information. We decided to visit the children's new school unannounced.

"Could you direct us to our daughter's classroom?" Charlie asked as we stood in the elementary school office that morning.

The secretary was very helpful, and we were soon on our way to a classroom. Grace, our fifth-grade daughter, looked surprised yet happy to see us. Suddenly she acted like something was wrong.

"Does Mom know you are here?" she asked.

We truthfully told her "No" and began to explain what had happened and our long search to find her and her brother and sister.

The other side of the story began to unfold. The school officials had been instructed to contact the mother and the police if the children's father ever tried to find them.

The children's mother arrived soon and the police a few minutes later. Now we saw the children inside a locked automobile across the parking lot, their faces filled with fear and sadness. We weren't even allowed to speak with them or give them a hug. An angry verbal exchange followed between my husband and his ex-

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wife. She filed a complaint against him, claiming harassment, and he was banned from Washington County, in northwestern Oregon. Rather than fight her desire to escape and risk having her take the children even farther away, my husband backed off. We returned home . . . defeated.

## MOURNING

Never again did we have scheduled visitations with Charlie's three children. They did contact us periodically. Perhaps once a year, on their own and sneaking behind their mother's back, they phoned us. We didn't have the liberty to call the children, since their communication with us was carried out in secret. On those rare occasions when their mother gave in to their desire to see us, it always seemed there was a mountain to climb—an uphill battle in an attempt to restart relationships.

Our newly formed family had to find a way to adjust. Andrea, Mike, and I could not fully realize the depth of pain simmering inside of Charlie as he went from day to day. Depression would have possibly been the clinical description. He was in a state of mourning, yet there were no physical deaths to relate to. We discovered that the death of a personal relationship with your children is often worse than a physical death. There is never really closure, and yet there is no closeness because the children live beyond your reach. So hope springs up each morning and dwindles away each night.

Every morning Charlie wondered if this would be the day for a phone call or letter from his children. By night we faced the reality that we were no better off than the day before. Did the children think of their father? Did they still know he loved them? Did they know he still wanted to be an important part of their lives? We hoped so.

## HOPE AND PAIN

Life is bearable because an eternal spark of hope somehow simmers deep in the human spirit, refusing to burn out.



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(And for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe. (1 Timothy 4:10)

Both of us knew God existed. But in those days we were not walking in fellowship with God and didn't know how to find peace in godly hope. So we were unable to appropriate God's comfort to our lives. We simply understood our state of powerlessness to make these three children an active part of our family life.

Yet for some reason, a spark of hope kept burning in our hearts. Hope must be a gift from the Lord, a reflection of His love for each of us. Because we loved Grace, Charles, and Sabrina we could not accept the permanency of never being a part of their lives. They were an important part of our family picture. (I wonder if God experiences this same pain as He hopes, in love, for us to come to Him?)

Charlie's pain was obviously greater than was mine. As the birth parent, he would forever feel a tug at the heartstrings by these children. But he was also the head of our home. Whatever he felt on the inside set the tone for our family life. Because he couldn't come to grips with his loss but chose to rehearse it daily, the air was often pretty thick at our house. Hope mingled with despair is a difficult lifestyle to balance. My husband's misery controlled our daily lives, holding us fast in its grip.

Life in our home centered on three people who were not even there. Everything surrounding Charlie verified his loss of parental influence with his children. He saw no way to turn back the hands of time and create a lifescape more pleasing to his emotions. As he began living out this conclusion and feeling the full weight of his own prior decisions, Charlie wouldn't allow himself to become a healthy stepparent to my two children. He was too focused on what he had lost to appreciate what he had gained. Andrea and Mike were a constant reminder of the relationship he couldn't have with his own flesh and blood. He had traded fatherhood with his children for confinement with mine—a role he was unwilling to accept. Suddenly I found a hardness in his heart I had not expected.

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“I didn’t marry your children. I married you.”

“That is very unfair. You knew I had children all along. Our wedding meant you accepted coming into their lives as well as mine.”

This tension sent the message that I could not count on my husband to nurture my children. I began an awkward attempt to cover for the love he wouldn’t give them, often trying to play both mom and dad. I became a Brownie leader for Andrea and a Cub Scout leader for Mike. Their lives wouldn’t be put on hold because of their stepfather’s inability to participate.

It was hard to balance raising two children with living successfully with a man whose inner struggles I could not soothe. What would happen to our family? The plans we made before our marriage seemed to be shattering. The bedrooms lovingly prepared for Grace, Charles, and Sabrina sat shrine-like as empty reminders of what could have been.

It was as if lions were crouching at our door, awaiting every opportunity to pounce. I felt the children and I had become their prey—and began having second thoughts about this marriage and blaming myself for unwise decisions. Yet I felt locked into the marriage.

## DEFINING LIONS

“Lion attacks”—those aggressive and injurious assaults that take place in our lives—can originate with the choices we as individuals make or they can originate in sudden life events, such as the termination of a job, an automobile accident, or the diagnosis of a terminal illness.

A lionlike attack can be premeditated, devised by someone to catch us off guard, or it could be thrown upon us from out of the blue. One sunny day life is defined for us by one set of family boundaries. The next day the family unit we cherished is in total disarray. We had no warning of the change and so we didn’t have time to avert the attack.

Why do lion attacks occur? Perhaps the person attacking us is acting out of self-preservation, or out of the fear of suffering his

own emotional attack, or even because he harbors a vengeful spirit. There are as many reasons for attacks as there are circumstances. We may not be privileged to know the answers.

The temperament of the lion is to be the predator. He stalks his prey, plans to gain the upper hand, and at just the right moment pounces on his intended victim. The swiftness of the lion is to be feared.

Perhaps this is why, when we encounter a lion in life, our body sends a wave of fear, shock, anger, even grief, over us. Physically we experience an immediate adrenaline surge to cope with the surprise event. In a split second we jump into action, often in the form of panic.

That's exactly what happened to us. When we realized our children were missing, fear struck. We jumped into the car, brainstorming as we sped through the streets toward our home. Fear made search for quick answers.

## DAVID

Looking back, we now see this particular lion attack as the beginning of a long journey, one God would use to draw us to Him. That is why hindsight is so valuable. It allows us to gain an entirely new perspective. However, at this crucial time in our lives, we could only see the road blocked at every turn. To make matters worse, it was such a bumpy road. It led to no pleasurable destination.

How could the loss of a relationship with three children possibly be building character in us? Why would God allow such a cruel event to take place? We have since discovered a man in the Bible named David, whom God prepared for bigger life purposes through the lions he encountered as a shepherd.

At a young age he was given the responsibility of tending his family's flock of sheep. This teenaged boy's job description was—day and night—to defend those helpless sheep from the wild animals who roamed the grazing fields of Israel. God was grooming him. It wouldn't be easy, but David was learning how to have victory over the lions.

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David knew that physical strength alone wasn't sufficient to overcome the prowess of the beasts. What was his most powerful weapon? He would find that answer as he learned to rely on the protection of the mighty God he loved. But learning to trust in God's deliverance meant that a time of testing would come. And it did.

And there came a lion. (1 Samuel 17:34 KJV)

The Bible tells us that God enabled David to triumph over that lion. As David's confidence grew, his fears were transformed into valor. All the years of grooming in the fields of Israel had a purpose. Because of David's experience with lions as a young man, he was ready to face the Philistine challenger Goliath without fear, triumphing over him and going on to survive many attacks against his life by King Saul. When David went to Saul to ask permission to face Goliath, he said:

“Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” (1 Samuel 17:36–37)

David had a confident mind-set. The Philistines described Goliath as the largest and most feared man in all the land. Yet David likened him to the lion in the field—and appropriated the same victory over Goliath he had gained over the lion. He had seen the Lord's deliverance in the past. He did not doubt it in this new circumstance.

Later David faced other challenges.

[King] Saul tried to pin him to the wall with his spear, but David eluded him as Saul drove the spear into the wall. That night David made good his escape. Saul sent men to David's house to watch it and to kill him in the morning. But Michal, David's wife, warned him, “If you don't run for your life tonight, tomorrow you'll be killed.” (1 Samuel 19:10–11)

David had a multitude of adversaries. Yet, over and over, David escaped the plots of a jealous and angry Saul and the attacks of other foes. His inner assurance was in the Lord's deliverance. That was where he found his strength.

We could have used confidence like David's on the day we went to pick up our children. We discovered that kind of assurance only after years of sleepless nights and far too many angry days trying to fight the battle in our own strength.

## PAUL

Lest we think David's life was representative of the way things were like in the Old Testament but not applicable to life today, we find the same lion-sized struggles in the New Testament in the life of another faithful man of God, the apostle Paul. His life was hard. He was beaten, shipwrecked, thrown in prison, persecuted, and deserted by those he once thought were his friends. Yet Paul testified to deliverance from life's lions (even *literal* lions) —just as David had.

At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength. . . . And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:16–18)

Even though everyone deserted him, Paul had this to say: "May it not be held against them." Why could he say such a thing? Read on. "The Lord stood at my side . . ." He knew a better Friend, One closer than any of his fleshly brothers and completely able to deliver him. His name was Jesus.

With both the Old and the New Testaments speaking to us of the lion's attack, we should expect to experience extreme events in our own lives. Our circumstances will be different from David's and Paul's, but these men have given us a pattern to follow. Our strength, hope, and victory lie in the same place—in calling on the Lord.



*Growth and Application*

Commit to memory 1 Timothy 4:10.

1. Are you facing a lionlike event in your family? If so, how are you coping? Try to define the event and your emotions.
2. Read the Scripture passages from 1 Samuel 17 and 19 again, and express how these verses help you understand the assurance David had. Do you have that same assurance of God's deliverance? Why or why not? What difference could it make in your own struggle?
3. What concept from chapter 1 was most valuable to you? Why? How could these new thoughts impact your family today?



*Prayer of Application*

*Lord, You know the lions we have met thus far on our blended journey, and only You know the ones yet to come. Help us to see Your hope and gain confidence in Your deliverance. We pray for strength*

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*to go beyond the heartache of disappointments and the challenges of blending our family. Let us discover Your forming hand upon our lives. Create in us a desire to overcome, and not succumb, to the adversities of blending that we might be a family reflecting a confident faith in a God who is able to bring us the victory. We do not serve the God of hopelessness but the God of all hope. Amen.*

### NOTES

1. *Active Spirituality: A Non-Devotional Guide*, by Charles R. Swindoll © 1994, Word Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee. All rights reserved.
2. *Dateline NBC*, National Broadcasting Company, 18 May 1998, page 2 of transcript.
3. Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *Experiencing God Day-by-Day* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 209.