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CHAPTER ONE

KING ME

HIS LIFE COULD NOT HAVE BEEN GOING ANY BETTER.

And then the phone rang.

He was an evangelist who preached the Word with the Holy Spirit's authority and power. He was the most sought-after evangelist in his denomination. If you wanted him to come and preach in your church, you had to get in line and wait for a minimum of four years. He was a man who was enjoying the favor of God on his life and ministry.

The numerous invitations were always a pull away from his family. But he and his wife had settled on a formula that had worked well and enabled him to spend time at home with his bride and son that he dearly loved. The formula was simple: He would go out and preach for two weeks and then come home for two weeks. And then he would go out again for two weeks and back home for another two. Everything was working and God was blessing. His marriage was strong. His boy, now a teenager, was doing well in school and athletics. And his ministry

was taking off like a rocket.

And then the phone rang.

It was a very short phone call from his wife. She had just had the latest in a series of arguments with their sixteen-year-old son. She had asked him to do something and he told her point-blank that he wasn't going to do it. This six-foot-two boy was wearing her down. His strong will was starting to take its toll. So she called her husband and in a fairly short conversation reported the events that had just taken place. And then she simply said, "I need you." He replied that he would cancel the remaining meetings and drive home immediately. Neither one of them knew that their son was listening to their conversation from the next room. The teenager knew he was pushing the limits and was curious to see how his father would respond. He would soon find out.

His father arrived home and within days a For Sale sign was in the front yard. The father then cancelled every one of his scheduled meetings for the next four years and accepted the pastorate of a small church in another state. For the next two years, until his son graduated from high school and went off to college, he pastored the small church and mentored his growing son.

With his son headed off to college, he was ready to return to evangelism. But in those few years multiple changes had taken place in his church denomination. Many of the older pastors had retired and been replaced by younger men who were unfamiliar with his ministry. Invitations were less frequent. Those few years away from evangelism had cost him dearly in terms of his career and calling. Quite frankly, to a degree, he would never recover. The decision to go home had come at a great price.

But because he had made the tough decision and went home to

focus on his family, years later his son would begin a ministry known as Focus on the Family.

I recently had the privilege of ministering with Dr. James Dobson during a weeklong conference sponsored by Focus on the Family. And when Dr. Dobson told the story about the decision his father had made, I knew it was the opening for this book.

James Dobson is the product of his father, James Dobson Sr. The elder Mr. Dobson was a man who knew his biblical priorities. That was the motivation that led him to make the decision to build his son before he built his ministry. Few men would have the courage or the conviction to make such a step. But aren't you glad that he did? I know that Dr. Dobson is.

James Dobson Sr. had a wonderful wife and James Dobson Jr. had a wonderful mother. She was a godly and capable woman. She loved both her husband and son and would do anything for them. And she did. But she was wise enough to know when she had reached her limitations. That's when she called her husband.

As great a woman as she was, she knew that she couldn't mentor their son. That was something only her husband could do. And he knew it too. So he bit the bullet, denied himself, said no to the crowds and to the invitations, and went home to do the work that only a man can do.

The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 16:24–25,

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”

Here was a man who denied himself. He didn't do what was best for him; he did what was best for his wife and his son. They needed him. The arrangement that had worked for so many years was no longer working. It was time for a new plan. So he walked away from his ministry success and mentored his son.

If he hadn't paid the price, he possibly could have lost his son.

And he couldn't take that risk.

So he denied himself, took up the cross of discipleship, embraced a smaller ministry and began to use the next twenty-four months to turn his boy into a man.

In doing so, he lost something. In a sense, he lost his life. He lost the crowds, the joy, and the privilege of seeing God change so many people's lives. But he had a son whose life needed some changes. And he needed a father to show him what those changes would be.

ANOTHER WAKE-UP CALL

About six years ago, I got my own wake-up call. It didn't come over the phone. It came from my own son. And it came right out of the blue. My then sixteen-year-old son was in trouble, and I had not realized it. Sure, he had shown the signs of any typical young man going through the throes of growing up. We had always been close, and I thought that I was on top of those things with him. But at the time when he needed me most, I suddenly woke up to a very hard truth. I had dropped the ball. I went through a fathering crisis that brought me to my knees and taught me some of the hardest lessons of this book. And I intend to share some of that crisis with you in the upcoming chapters. Suffice it to say that it was probably the most difficult crisis of my life. I found myself in over my head and nearly without hope.

We live out in the country, and it has been my habit for several years to take long walks, just to get away and think and pray. On those walks there are no phone calls or fax machines or interruptions . . . just me and the Lord and our two faithful retrievers, panting along by my side. During this crisis, those walks became my lifeline. I found myself crying out to God for help, praying for my son, for wisdom, for a breakthrough, throwing myself upon His mercy and promises.

And I want you to know that God has been faithful. He has kept His promise in Psalm 50:15, “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me.” By His goodness and grace He did rescue me in the time of trouble.

Are you in a place of trouble with one of your children? Your heavenly Father sees you and hears your cries. And He promises to be your Mentor and walk you through it. Just like He did for James Dobson Sr. And just as He has done for fathers down through the centuries.

THE TRIED-AND-TRUE METHOD

Fathering may be the single greatest challenge of your life. Especially if you didn't have a dad who showed you the way.

But take heart. God has given us a guide map, an instruction manual, a tried-and-true method. What he asks of you is that you accept the challenge and trust him to lead you.

It is your responsibility and no one else's. You alone can prepare your son to be a man and to take his place as the leader of the family tribe.

Don't let that responsibility fall on your wife. Mothers are important. But if you let your wife become the primary mentor of your sons, one of two things will end up happening. They will grow up to be feminized men, or they will grow up to be angry men. God calls upon fathers

to mentor their sons.

These are hard times for young men. The messages around them are confusing and devastating. We can't depend on teachers or coaches or youth leaders to mentor our sons. It simply isn't enough. Your sons need you now more than ever.

This is a book about fathers mentoring sons. But let me give you a heads-up about what this book is not. It is not primarily a book on male or child psychology. Psychology is at its best when it is kneeling before the Word of God. This book is also not a formula for "how to make your son turn out okay," even though every father wants his son to turn out okay. Let me explain what I mean.

There are no perfect fathers so don't feel pressured to be one. There are no perfect prescriptions for fathering in this book or in any other. Fathers and sons are people. Fathers make mistakes. Sons make decisions. In fathering, we don't stick in a dollar (it used to be a quarter) and get out an ice-cold Coke. Fathering is more like building a house. You draw up the plans, you gather the materials, and then you start in. And you do the best job you can. Along the way, you might hit rock when you're digging the foundation, or lumber prices may rise, or it may rain for six straight months. Then the concrete drivers may go on strike. Inevitably, you will discover some adjustments you need to make that you hadn't foreseen in your original plans. That's sort of what fathering is like.

Fathers are sons that have grown up. They are flawed human beings. And children are individuals—each one with unique needs and personalities. That's why fathering is always a "learn as you go" thing. That's why every day is a new day for fathers. Sometimes you think you know your son, and then you find that you don't. Sometimes influences or circumstances that are completely out of your control enter into a

son's life and deeply affect or derail him. Sometimes you find yourself on your knees with no answers at all. Other times you find yourself right in the middle of the fight of your life for this son God has given to you.

We're going to use the tried-and-true method in this book. We're going to go back to the authoritative, living, relevant Word of God and try to discover the lessons there for fathers on mentoring our sons.

And the place we are going to start is with the kings of the Old Testament.

KINGS AND FATHERS

Why start there? you may ask. Weren't most of those guys lousy fathers? Yes they were. But as Yogi Berra once said, "You can see a lot by looking." All of the kings were fathers. Some of them were good kings (a few were even great kings) but lousy fathers. Most of them were bad kings and bad fathers. One of them was a good king who became a good father. Yet from their lives we can learn vivid lessons about what children need in a father. The kings teach us that *a good man cannot simply rely on his example* to meet the needs of his son. A godly example is a great gift to a son. But the kings teach us that a man must be *intentional* in his fathering.

The famous painter Pablo Picasso was entertaining in his home when one of the guests noticed that he had none of his paintings hanging in his home.

"Why is that, Pablo? Do you not appreciate your own pictures?"

"On the contrary," replied Picasso. "I enjoy them very much. It's just that I can't afford them."

Picasso couldn't afford his own paintings.

You can't afford to not intentionally mentor your son. The Old Testament kings were all wealthy men, but as a group, they didn't consider

the high price of *not* mentoring their sons. It cost them and the nation dearly.

You may not be a king, but you are the designated king of your home. Your wife is the queen. And your children are the subjects. One day, your sons will step up to the throne and carry on the family heritage. Their decisions will affect generations upon generations to come. As we will see, what happened in the lives of the Old Testament kings is utterly relevant to fathers today.

WHAT EVERY SON WANTS

Every son wants to be mentored by his father. He wants to have a special place in his father's heart. He wants to respect and emulate him. Down deep, he wants to know his father and be as close to him as possible. S. D. Gilbert said it well: "It may be hard on some fathers not to have a son, but it is much harder on a boy not to have a father."

Timmy Smith felt somewhat distanced from his stepfather. Timmy's family knew what it was to go through hard times. At times his mom worked three jobs to provide for the family. Timmy's hero was not his stepfather; it was a baseball pitcher by the name of Tug McGraw. Young Timmy kept McGraw's baseball card taped on his bedroom wall. He loved to see Tug McGraw pitch on TV and he loved the way he challenged the batters from the pitcher's mound. Young Timmy thought Tug was the coolest guy he had ever seen.

When Timmy was eleven, he was looking through some boxes for some pictures for a school report. You can imagine how shocked he was when he came across his birth certificate and read that his real father was none other than Tug McGraw. He had no idea. But this began a search to get to know his real father. After many years, the father and son rec-

onciled. And Timmy eventually changed his name to reflect who it was he really belonged to. Tug McGraw recently passed away from cancer. And by his side was his son. Although they had been separated for years, they were finally reunited.

The father, Tug McGraw, once famed for his athletic ability, died in the care of a son with whom he had been reunited.

His son, Tim McGraw, one of the biggest stars in country music, was finally connected with the man who had been his hero before he knew he was his father.

And to both men it was clear that what ultimately mattered was not the fame or the fortune. It was the priceless relationship between father and son.¹

“KING ME”

I can remember as a boy playing checkers with my dad. And when I would finally maneuver one of my checkers to the other side of the board, I would look at my dad and say, “King me.” And then he would put a checker on top of my checker and it looked like a crown. Suddenly my little checker had turned into a king, and as king, he could move any direction that I deemed necessary.

That’s what every son is saying to his father. Whether you realize it or not, there’s nothing more in life that he wants than for you to “king him.” One day you will pass off the scene and he will assume your role as head of the family. It’s your job to prepare him and get him ready for that day. The best leaders think far enough ahead to groom a replacement. That’s what fathering is all about. It’s mentoring and equipping your son to become a man who will assume the family leadership for the next generation. You have no higher calling in life. It is your God-given

assignment. There is nothing nobler in all of life than to shape your son into a man.

The kings didn't do it.

But with God's help, we still can.