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CHAPTER ONE

The Journey Begins: Birth to Pre-Kindergarten

*For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am
fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

PSALM 139:13–14

Our strong-willed child, Aaron Joseph Smiley, arrived in February of 1981. I still remember the moment of his birth. Dr. Tanner (our family physician and the father of five sons) announced, “It’s a boy!”

Naively, my enthusiastic response was, “Oh good! I already know how to *do* boys!” I don’t remember seeing Dr. Tanner’s eyes roll to the back of his head, but undoubtedly he wondered how I could make such a ridiculous statement!

Our first son, Matthew, was two years old at the time. I would classify him as a compliant child. It was not that he always obeyed us perfectly, but he did “aim to please.” As a former teacher, I had perfected the “schoolteacher look.” You know how it goes: lips drawn tightly in a pseudo-pucker, eyebrows knit together, and a very stern countenance. That “look” was completely effective with my oldest son. A stern look or a gentle scolding generally brought about conviction, legitimate repentance, and a heartfelt vow to “do better.” (Can you see why I had such confidence when son number two was born? Just look at how well I had been doing with son number one!)

But the truth was that I did not know how to “do boys” any more

than I had conquered the art of parenting. And that was a truth that I was soon to discover. Forget “the look” when it came to Aaron.

“Liam, my four-year-old and I were driving home from preschool, and he asked if we could have lunch at McDonald’s. I explained that it wasn’t a possibility. Because Liam is strong-willed (and not to be deterred by such a flimsy statement), he pursued the idea with great determination. When I finally convinced him that I was NOT going to stop at the fast-food restaurant for lunch, Liam folded his arms across his chest and humped, ‘Well, Mommy, you are making a bad choice.’ My own words, frequently spoken, were repeated in an effort to manipulate me with guilt and gain control.”

While Matthew was compliant and aimed to please, Aaron had different ideas. I used to explain his strong-willed nature this way: “If we draw a line in the sand and tell Aaron not to cross it and why, *and* we tell him the penalty for disobedience, he will immediately step up to the line, as close as he can possibly get, and inquire, ‘What did you say you were going to do to me if I step over this line?’ Then he reviews the consequences and determines whether or not to cross the line. And many times, over the line he goes.” Ah, a strong-willed child.

Aaron did not always use defiance to try to get his way. This sweet little boy came into the world looking just like the Gerber baby, complete with wispy blond hair, big blue eyes, and a ready smile. One of my earliest recollections of his manipulation skills involved the use of charm, not defiance. When he was just a little over two years old, I remember scolding Aaron. I don’t recall the issue, but I do remember his actions. When I finally paused in my reprimand and took a breath, Aaron smiled his deep-dimpled smile, reached out with his chubby little hands and patted me gently on both cheeks. “Dat be alright, Mommy,” he cooed in an effort to comfort me, his overwrought mother. Ah, what a sweet, caring child. Wait a minute! I wasn’t the one in need

of comfort. I wasn't the one in trouble, he was! I'm sure Aaron thought, "If this works, why not go for it?"

"Christine did not want to go to the first day of pre-school. I talked her into getting into the truck, and then she was all excited and really wanted to go. We got there, and all of a sudden, she was mad—screaming, crying, absolutely mad—and she could not believe that I was going to make her go into this lady's room. So she would not go, would not go, would not go. 'Mom, I hate that lady, don't make me go, don't make me go. I can't believe you're doing this to me. I don't want to go, she's mean, she's mean, she's mean! I hate that lady. I hate that lady 'cause she hates me. Take me home right now!'"

Strong emotion can definitely sway a parent. "I can't believe you're doing this to me" can make any parent step back and think. Hopefully, the parent filters this sentiment through the mind to realize that strong emotion and words like "mean" and "hate" are words used to manipulate and gain control. Also, strong emotion can translate into a tantrum, which can add the term "embarrassment" to your list of sentiments.

Very few tricks that Aaron tried (charm, guilt, strong emotion, or otherwise) worked with his dad. Remember, I told you that John is a strong-willed child turned responsible adult.

He knew the tricks and the importance of wise parenting.

At one point, John and two-year-old Aaron were literally eyeball-to-eyeball on the stairs, and the words from John's mouth were as follows: "Aaron, you will not win. When I tell you to do something, you must do it." If only that was the last time he had to make that statement! Even at an early age, Aaron desired control of his world.

*"It is a wise father
that knows his
own child."¹*

SHAKESPEARE

“On another occasion, Emily was sitting at the table doing a craft project with her dad, and she told him out of the blue that he was a genius. Her dad asked her why, and she said, ‘because you do everything I say.’ Emily was three-and-a-half when this happened.”

Aaron accepted Christ as his Savior at around four years old. It was actually the result of the guilt and remorse he felt about his own out-of-control, strong-willed behavior. He was having a very bad day and was in trouble with everyone in the family—Dad, Mom, and his older brother.

Here is a little background. Beginning when he was a toddler, Aaron was interested in agriculture and animals. I remember pulling into a cornfield on one of the family farms and hearing little Aaron pipe up from the backseat, “Dat torn looks dood!” (Translation: That corn looks good!) Our older son did not notice the status of the corn and had no opinion about its potential yield. Aaron’s paternal grandfather is a farmer. This common love of agriculture made these two fast friends from the very beginning.

Now, back to the story of Aaron’s personal encounter with Christ. As I said previously, that day he was behaving quite poorly (gross understatement). Bedtime finally came, and with it, the hope for a better tomorrow with less confrontation. Finally, there was peace and quiet. The next morning Aaron was up quite early. He waddled down the stairs in his footie pajamas, dragging one of his favorite blankets. When he arrived at the threshold of the kitchen, he stopped abruptly, waited for my attention, and then proceeded with his announcement.

“I asked Jesus into my heart last night,” he declared. I was thrilled about this and immediately began to ask him about the details.

“That is just great!! Tell me all about it,” I pried. “What happened to help you make this decision?”

“Well,” he began, “I was sooooooo bad yesterday that everyone was mad at me. I figured that even *Grandpa* would have been mad.”

(Remember, as far as Aaron was concerned, he and Grandpa were as tight as you could get. So the thought of Grandpa being mad was a very serious thing!)

He continued, “But I knew that even if everyone else was mad at me, Jesus loved me, so I asked Him into my heart.”

By the way, that conversion experience was real and is often referred to by Aaron as “the most boring testimony possible.” Personally I call it “the testimony every mother wants her child to have.” Understanding God’s love was important and would temper Aaron’s behavior somewhat, but it definitely did not turn him into a compliant child.

*You have made known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

PSALM 16:11

The same year, Aaron became a big brother. This event was exciting for everyone in the family. And Aaron was no exception. I can still picture his little face tightening up with excitement and hear him say, “I love Jonathan so much—I just want to squeeze his guts out!” The fact that everyone else in the family thought that he just might do that very thing was a little scary. But we kept a cautious eye on the baby and Aaron and watched as the little strong-willed child assumed the role of nurturing big brother.

*And he has given us this command:
Whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

1 JOHN 4:21

A Closer Look with Aaron

My earliest memory of being a strong-willed child and having an intense desire to be in charge of my own life was when I was four years old. We bought a small house in town and proceeded to tear down our old farmhouse in order to build a new home on that location. Even though Matthew and I were little, there were things we did to help my dad with his project. Because there were raw materials in the old house that could be utilized in our new one, he was literally tearing the house

down rather than burning it. One of our jobs was to sort various building supplies, like hardwood, from the useless things, like shingles.

One day we were carrying materials from one pile to another. It goes without saying that this was a silly job. As a four-year-old, I could see little importance in simply reorganizing the junk! And if such a stupid job really was legitimate, for goodness' sake, let's get a tractor going to at least make the task easier and more fun. I made that suggestion, and it fell on deaf ears. Dad, for some reason—probably because a tractor was really not necessary—said that our work assignment was NOT going to change.

If there is one thing a strong-willed child dislikes, it is doing any task or assignment that he deems useless—especially if he suggested a “better way” to do the meaningless job, and it was rejected. And on that particular day, that is precisely what happened! I wanted my idea to be honestly considered. Using a tractor made complete sense to me. I wanted to defend my position, but I wasn't given that opportunity.

My older brother might have thought the sorting job was a bad idea too, and he may even have liked my idea to use a tractor; but he didn't choose to cause a problem. I did. I simply decided that I would not do what Dad had ordered and expected. Dad would have to pay the price for not considering my great idea. I wouldn't work as hard as he wanted me to, and he would have to shift some of his attention to me and away from his agenda. I remember Matthew telling me that my slowdown strike was a bad idea. When Dad noticed my manipulation of the situation, slowing down but not completely disobeying (a gentle way to say defiance under control), he told me precisely what I was supposed to do, and he also told me the consequences for disobedience. I would be paddled. I pondered my options, much to my brother's discomfort. “You better do it, Aaron,” he said. “Dad's serious!” I knew that he was serious, but I had to decide if my work slowdown, impeding Dad's progress, was more important

than the pain I'd receive. And, guess what? I decided to go for the paddling.

As I cried, Dad announced that he expected me to do as I was told. As you may guess, I weighed the pros and cons of another confrontation. My brother (the compliant one) by now determined that I needed my head examined. "Come on, Aaron, do what you're supposed to do." He could not fathom the thought that winning my case was so important that I would pay a price. That was the first time, but not the last, that I realized we were wired differently. He couldn't understand my strong-willed nature, and I couldn't understand why he couldn't understand. (But I did appreciate his sympathy when I decided to go for a second round before my Dad was able to make his point that defiance would not win.)

*Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light for my path.*

PSALM 119:105



A Good Word from John, the Resident Dad

I can still remember hearing Kendra say in exasperation, "Parenting a strong-willed child is just like parenting any other child . . . TIMES TEN!" There is truth in that statement on two fronts. All kids need the love of their parents. And parents want their children to grow up to be responsible adults. Furthermore, Christian parents hope that their kids will learn to love and obey God. Those similarities are true whether you have been blessed with a strong-willed child or not.

The other truth in Kendra's frustrated exclamation is that the day-to-day task of parenting a strong-willed child is definitely a more exhausting job. There is very little rest and

reprieve when you are the parent of a strong-willed child under the age of five. Your responsibility to provide love and to guide their journey to responsible adulthood is more challenging than the job of the parent of a compliant child, yet it is no less rewarding.

As an Air Force Reserve pilot, there were times when I was away from home. At one point, I flew a mission to Germany and remained there for ten days. That was when Aaron, only three years old at the time, decided to take advantage of Kendra's single-mom status and her recent introduction into the nature of a strong-willed child. I called home to see how things were going and discovered one very distraught mom! My recollection is that the entire phone call involved Kendra crying and me listening to Kendra crying. I knew that something had to be done when I arrived back home.

I took Aaron aside and explained to him that "Mom and I are one. When you upset Mom, you upset me. And when you upset me, you will have to pay the price." Aaron understood that there would be negative ramifications. (There will be more on those negative ramifications/discipline in the next chapter.) He understood that Kendra and I were in this parenting thing together and that I would not allow him to harass her. Whenever necessary, I would protect Kendra (the parent just learning about the tenacity of a strong-willed child).

Appreciating the blessing of a strong-willed child may be difficult at times. But don't get discouraged or give up. Galatians 6:9: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* The "proper time" may not be today or tomorrow. But today is the time to begin to develop the skills you will need to parent your strong-willed child.

If Kendra was even close with her "TIMES ten" claim, you have no time to waste.

By the time Aaron reached school age, there was no doubt in my mind that Aaron was a high-maintenance child. In my thinking, that title “high-maintenance” put most of the responsibility on us as parents. We didn’t have a label or an excuse for behavior that needed to be corrected. Just as a fine-tuned race car demands more sophisticated and time-consuming maintenance, I realized that our potential “top performer” demanded more sophisticated (read: frequent and intense) effort. As he prepared to go to the adventure called school, I prayed that the adults who would have his attention for the majority of the day would appreciate his attributes, keep him under control, and help to mold and nurture his development.

Because John and I are both teachers by training, we instilled in Aaron a respect for education and the teaching profession. He also knew that we would reinforce any discipline administered in school. It was our hope that the teachers would care about Aaron enough to control and encourage him. Some did, some did not.