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## *Chapter 1*

# LOSING FAITH

If you've ever been part of a loving, healthy family you have smelled the sweet aroma of heaven. If you've ever lived in a troubled, broken home you have breathed the foul stench of hell. This book is about making your home what God intended it to be—a place of intimacy and joy instead of isolation and pain; a little bit of heaven rather than a foretaste of hell.

The home is the primary context of our spiritual formation—for better or worse. God wired us for flesh-and-blood relationships with a mom, a dad, a spouse, a child, and others who profoundly shape our perception and experience of the faith—whether they intend to or not. This book is our invitation for you to become highly intentional about fulfilling your God-ordained role at home and, in the process, giving your family something better than you might have received.

## FALLING ON DEAF EARS

“Your relationship with your parents, and especially your father, has a significant influence on how you perceive God.” While not the main point of my message, those words hit twenty-eight-year-old Maria like nothing she had ever heard. Visiting our church while kicking the tires of Christianity, she nervously approached me at the end of the service to ask if I would be willing to schedule an appointment.

A few days later Maria visited my wife and me to discuss her spiritual journey. She brought a journal in which she had been recording thoughts and notes while attending our church with a friend. She read several pages aloud, giving me insights into her concerns and questions. One particular entry grabbed my attention:

I hear the songs and sermons about God sending His only Son to die for us. I wonder: Why would God do that to His Son?

I glanced at my wife, Olivia, wondering if Maria’s dad had been like hers. Sure enough, he had. A self-centered man, Maria’s father had abandoned the family for a series of other women. He failed to protect his little girl, putting her in harm’s way. Making matters worse, he often quoted the Bible or, rather, misquoted it. No wonder Maria perceived the death of Christ as the result of a selfish heavenly Father saying “Take my kid, don’t take me!” That’s what her dad would do.

God is a mystery who can’t be grasped by the human mind. That’s why He reveals Himself to us using metaphors like a good shepherd and a righteous judge. The most common metaphors of His full reality are that of a loving husband and a caring father. We best understand what it means to relate to

God by observing what it means to properly relate to a spouse or a parent. But what happens when we have a warped point of reference for these common metaphors?

Imagine describing a fresh-baked chocolate-chip cookie to someone who has only eaten stale dog biscuits. Or describing a relaxing soak in a warm bath to someone who has only experienced the bone-chilling shiver of a cold shower. Something similar happens to those raised in a troubled home. Words spoken of God, even words from the Bible, can evoke a completely different image than the one intended.

I told Maria that my own dad sacrificed himself for his wife and kids every day of my childhood, working two jobs to feed the family and taking us to church no matter how exhausted he might have been. “Fatherhood is about giving up your life to care for a wife and children,” I explained. “As a father of four, I have no question that I would literally die for my children. But I would not willingly let someone take the life of one of my kids. That would be asking too much. To me, God willingly giving His only Son means the ultimate sacrifice.”

Still, to Maria it suggested something else.

We continued reading her journal entries. I learned that Maria had spent a lot of time with her happily married friend, and that she desperately wanted the same for herself. But Maria had never even been on a date and viewed herself as unlovable, another consequence of growing up without a nurturing dad.

I gently pointed Maria to the metaphor of God as a loving suitor pursuing his cherished beloved, explaining how humanity had been seduced away by a deceiver trying to keep us from the arms of our rightful husband. “Maria,” I explained, “God made you to be His bride!”

The words connected, and within a few weeks my wife and

I were holding hands with Maria as she prayed to accept God's marriage proposal. As we lifted our heads, I saw Maria's joyous tears releasing an inner beauty that had been hiding behind a mask of lonely self-protection.

Maria's story had a happy ending. She grew in her faith and I had the honor of officiating at her wedding about a year after our first meeting. But the kind of hurdles she faced in embracing Christianity are all too common among the upcoming generation.

## CHRISTIANITY'S ORPHANS

A 2008 study conducted by the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame found that only about 17 percent of emerging adults become more active in religion than they were as teens, while 54 percent back away from active faith.<sup>1</sup> In a book released that same year entitled *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons reported that the increasingly negative perception of Christian faith in our culture has been fueled by the fact that most self-identified unbelievers in America are, like Maria, former church kids. Their study found that "the vast majority of outsiders in this country, particularly among young generations, are actually de-churched individuals."<sup>2</sup>

Don't miss the significance of that statement. Perhaps for the first time in church history many of those most inclined toward belief—our own children—are actively rejecting or passively abandoning the faith. And the problem, in our opinion, is not what's happening at church but what desperately needs to happen at home.

Those who have seen the 1968 film version of the musical *Oliver!* may recall the barefoot, ill-kept orphan boys car-

rying their bowls to mealtime while singing “Food, Glorious Food.” The song is a vain wish because each will receive only one measly serving of awful gruel. As the boys sing, the camera pans past a room where those who run the orphanage gorge themselves on a delicious feast, just a few feet away from the half-starved boys. The most striking part of the scene, however, is the phrase stenciled on a stone wall behind the boys: “God Is Love.”

Are those three words true? Absolutely.

Does the orphans’ experience tell them it’s true? Certainly not.

Which do you think they will believe?

No matter how creatively we proclaim God’s Word to children at church, they are more likely to believe their experience of the faith at home. That’s because incarnation trumps proclamation.

Incarnation literally means “en-flesh-ment.” God became a flesh-and-blood human being to reveal Himself to us in a way written words could not accomplish. The gospel of John tells us that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14 NKJV). Christianity is not a religion of lofty ideals or a distant lawgiver. The God of Christianity is someone we “have seen with our eyes” and whom “our hands have handled” because the Father in His Son “was manifested to us” (1 John 1:1–2 NKJV). No wonder every major heresy in church history has been an attack on the doctrine of the incarnation. Satan hates that God became flesh. He also hates healthy families because they serve as flesh-and-blood icons of the unity and love that flows within and from the Trinity. The Scriptures tell us that when husband and wife become one flesh in the pleasure of marital union, it creates a picture of the beautiful union between Christ and His church. It also reaps the gift of children, filling the world with more fleshy reminders of Satan’s mortal enemy.

Life comes from unity with God and others—moving toward others. Death means separation—moving away. Happy homes echo the intimate joys of heaven. Broken, troubled families, by contrast, imitate the loneliness, isolation, and anger of hell.

Do you want to make the Devil cringe as if hearing scratching nails on a chalkboard? Then celebrate fifty years of marriage or enjoy laughter with your children around the dinner table. Satan does not fear a religion that merely stencils words on a stone wall, or even preaches them in a sermon. What he dreads is when the Word becomes flesh and blood in the tangible context of a God-honoring marriage and family.

## THE ROOTS OF FAITH

I have four kids. I want nothing more in life than for Kyle, Shaun, Troy, and Nicole to embrace my Christian faith. Every generation of believing parents has this same hope for their children. So why, all of a sudden, do fewer kids growing up in Christian families embrace Christian faith?

We spent two years facilitating a dialogue on this problem with a national network of church leaders including several from the Willow Creek Association—an organization on the forefront of church growth and ministry innovation over the past three decades. We came together in recognition that the next generation is abandoning Christianity at an alarming rate despite some of the best teaching, worship, student ministries, and coffee shops in church history. Churches have never worked harder; yet generational faith transfer is in decline. Something doesn't add up!

Imagine four budding flowers representing my four children. I gently cradle them in my hand, careful to protect the



delicate roots reaching out from the narrowing tips at the bottom of each stem. Aware of their need for the living water of the gospel, I bring them to a watering can called the local church where pastors, Sunday school teachers, and student pastors pour the life-giving nourishment of the good news onto their lives. But the water simply drips off the sides of my hand, failing to penetrate the dangling roots of their thirsty hearts.

Concerned, I urgently look for another solution. Fearing my children will wither and die unless I find a more effective means of imparting strong faith, I grab a bigger, more contemporary-looking watering can—one with cutting-edge music and a cool-looking student pastor—hoping it will more effectively reach my kids. But the heavy flow of water just splashes onto the ground.

Obviously, the problem is not with the size or style of the watering can. Roots only grow if planted in soil. Yet an entire generation of parents seems to have missed God's design. Faith must be nourished in the rich soil of a God-honoring family. The church's role is to provide the water. But lifelong faith requires deep, abiding roots.

Let's face a few sobering facts. Several studies have shown

that the vast majority of those who ever become believers in Jesus Christ do so as minors.<sup>3</sup> Statistically speaking, there is a 32 percent likelihood of someone becoming a believer before the age of thirteen, dropping to a 4 percent likelihood during the teen years and a 6 percent likelihood during the remaining decades of life.<sup>4</sup> No wonder Jesus told His disciples to bring the little children to Him. It seems there is a limited window of time when we are most inclined toward belief; during those few years our tender roots seek nourishment in the context of a believing family.

Does that mean a child growing up in a nonbelieving or passive family has no hope? Certainly not. As I mentioned earlier, my wife grew up in such a home yet became an active, passionate follower of Jesus Christ. Her life of faith began *after* turning thirteen when a friend invited her to church. Olivia's single mom had rejected Christianity and never once took her daughter to a religious service. But the story of how Olivia moved from being a dead-faith orphan to a living-faith believer further illustrates the power of God's design.

The minister of the church Olivia attended felt like a failure. His small congregation never grew to the size or influence he dreamed possible. Pastor Randy Piersma led and loved his tiny flock week after week while he wondered whether his call to ministry had been a mistake and questioned his own competence as a pastor.

Pastor Randy's daughter met Olivia the day she came to church with a friend. Before long, Darcee and Olivia became close and Olivia started spending time at their home, where she observed things she had never experienced in her own household: a loving father treating his wife with affection and respect, kids who enjoyed spending time with Mom and Dad, a family laughing together around the dinner table, and an emotional stability and playful joy foreign to her own broken,

troubled home. Olivia wanted what she saw. The gospel she heard preached in Randy's tiny church became a living picture in Randy's vibrant home, enabling Olivia to bathe in the warm refreshment of God's intended design.

Olivia spent every moment she could at the Piersma home, eventually becoming Randy's unofficial adopted daughter. He even walked her down the aisle in place of Olivia's deceased father on our wedding day. Three decades later, Olivia points to the reality of the gospel she saw in that Christian family as the catalyst for her own lifelong faith.

Ask anyone who ministers to students and they will tell you that kids from unbelieving families need more than an hour or two at church to establish deep roots. They need to experience the reality of a God-honoring home. They need someone to invite them into it and give them a tangible vision of things the church can only describe.

Every child deserves regular exposure to the life-giving warmth of a loving marriage and of parents who lay their lives down for their children. Ideally that will happen at home. But if not, then they need "free samples" that can give them an incarnational picture of what the words "God is love" really mean.

The next generation may be losing faith. But a small amount of intentionality can help turn the tide. In order to do so, we need to understand the process of spiritual formation at home.