



Youth Culture 101

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**Good News:
There's a Teenager in
Your Life!**



It is time for us to reject the wholesale cynicism of our culture regarding adolescence. Rather than years of undirected and unproductive struggle, these are years of unprecedented opportunity... These are the years of penetrating questions, the years of wonderful discussions never before possible. These are the years of failure and struggle that put the teen's true heart on the table. These are the years of daily ministry and of great opportunity.

—PAUL DAVID TRIPP IN *AGE OF OPPORTUNITY*¹

When I got to the point where I had been given all I could humanly handle, I never once doubted that God in his grace would give me all I needed to continue on and handle whatever was to come.

—MOTHER OF A TEENAGE SON LOCKED IN THE STRUGGLES OF ADOLESCENCE

It's a commonly held notion that raising or ministering to teenagers is always difficult. I'm here to tell you that for me, it's been an incredible ride marked by some amazing ups and a few challenging downs. I spent the first 16 years of my adult life working with teenagers in a variety of youth ministry positions. I've spent the last 17 years studying teenagers, their lives, and their culture. In the midst of all that, I've spent 23 years raising four kids of my own. Three have already passed through their teenage years. One's still smack dab in the midst of adolescence.

For the most part, my incredible ride's been marked by amazing sights and scenery that have put a big smile on my face. Teenagers are lots of fun, and mine have brought great joy to my heart. But there have been some periods during my journey—periods

that have coincided with my own kids' adolescent years—that have been quite bumpy. When I look in the rearview mirror and see the years that have flown by far too quickly, I see there have been times when I've missed a turn, fallen asleep at the wheel, or even wrecked altogether. There have been times when my kids have done the same. But through it all and by the grace of God, I've never once regretted the ride or wished I'd never set out on the journey in the first place. Whether you're a parent of or someone working with teenagers, I hope that when all is said and done, it's the same for you.

But let's face the truth: We're adults; they're teenagers. Although we may share a roof and DNA, a cultural-generational gap will exist. And if adults don't make an effort to love teenagers by working to close that gap, it *will* only continue to widen. What should parents do when they experience the highs and lows of parenting in a rapidly changing world? What should youth workers and others in relationships with teenagers do to close the gap and become more effective at fulfilling their unique callings? How can we avoid being overwhelmed by the normal feelings of confusion, frustration, and misunderstanding that go with the teenage years? Is there anything constant we can grasp? Yes, there is.

Finding Your Way Through the Maze of Their Adolescence

Our search and experience has yielded some distinct patterns and approaches consistently present when parents and youth workers and the teenagers they love have worked together well to find their way through the maze of contemporary adolescence. As you read through the remainder of this book, I trust you'll understand even more the unique pressures, problems, choices, and issues facing our teenagers in today's fast-paced and rapidly changing world. In order to be prepared to respond to these issues in a hope-filled, positive, compassionate, and productive manner, it's important that you understand and embrace several truths for yourself and your family and your youth ministry. I know from experience that if you take them to heart, they can radically transform your life and the way you approach the valuable years you spend with your kids.

Kids Are God's Gifts to Us

Our widespread cultural cynicism regarding teenagers and these exciting years of their lives is unjustified and must cease. The psalmist writes, “Don’t you see that kids are God’s best gift? The fruit of the womb his generous legacy? Like a warrior’s fistful of arrows are the kids of a vigorous youth. Oh, how blessed are you parents, with your quivers full of kids!” (Psalm 127:3-5, *The Message*). It’s a big mistake to think of kids as liabilities; they’re rewards from God, given to us as a sign of God’s favor. Because God values them so highly, so must we. They’re not inconveniences or nuisances—whether they’re in your home or in your youth room. Even during difficult times, the kids God’s given me as gifts *remain* gifts.

No One Ever Said It’d Be Easy

I learned a shocking lesson shortly after Caitlin’s birth, and I’ve been relearning it ever since. No matter how much time and effort I put into preparing for parenthood, there will always be surprises. Some of those surprises can seem paralyzing. Raising and relating to kids is difficult for everyone, and it tends to become more so as kids reach the teenage years. The situation grows more complex for parents who raise more than one child since each child brings a unique personality and set of experiences.

Each of us will experience highs and lows, jolts and joys, thrills and spills. If you’re struggling as a parent, rest assured you’re not alone. I’ve made efforts, but I’ve also made mistakes, struggled with feelings of inadequacy, and grappled with rebellion in my kids. I’ve known sickening dread, sleepless nights, rage, bitterness, frustration, shame, futile hopes being shattered, and the battle between tenderness and contempt. (If you’re a youth worker, you know a bit about this, too!)

If you’ve raised a teenager and been totally spared all of these experiences, it’s only by the grace of God. The reality is that it’s not easy. But we can approach our parenting as a glorious challenge and opportunity. Dr. Paul Tripp reminds us that “the teenage years are often cataclysmic years of conflict, struggle, and grief. They are years of new temptations, of trial and testing. Yet these

very struggles, conflicts, trials and tests are what produce such wonderful parental opportunities.”²

There Are No Perfect Kids...or Parents...or Youth Workers

The root of problems in our families and homes and youth ministries is the sinful, selfish nature of kids and adults. It can be difficult to coexist peacefully. Parents must strive to raise healthy, well-adjusted kids. But it’s unrealistic to expect perfect kids and perfect families. To embrace such expectations only burdens parents and their kids with never “measuring up.”

We must never forget that we’re all imperfect, finite beings touched by sin and incapable of perfection—not with our parenting, our ministries, or our homes.

The World Is More Than Happy to Raise Our Kids for Us

In recent years, adolescents have had fewer opportunities for times of interaction and communication with their parents and other adults. Many families have experienced divorce; and in those families where Mom and Dad still live together, members get busier all the time thanks to schedules full of meetings, activities, clubs, and sports. The other extreme is also occurring in a growing number of families, where members may all be at home in the evenings, but everyone retreats to the “aloneness” of their own rooms to interact “solo” with the TV, computer, or any number of media outlets that fill their personal spaces.

All of these factors keep families from eating together on a regular basis, and these realities have certainly contributed to the fact that when teenagers need advice, they’re more likely to turn first to a friend (55 percent), followed by Mom (44 percent), a boyfriend or girlfriend (23 percent), and then Dad (20 percent).³ When push comes to shove, American dads and moms are devoting less time to bringing up their sons and daughters, thereby allowing someone or something else to raise their kids for them.

As a result of his research on the lives of mid-adolescents (ages 14 to 18), Chap Clark concludes “many if not most mid-ad-

olescents have been set adrift by parental and familial authorities, and they are operating as if they are on their own.”⁴ This sad reality has been developing for years. Back in the early 1990s, I attended a presentation on a new reading program at our local elementary school. While I applauded our school district’s efforts in teaching kids to read, I was concerned about the social problems it cited for the existence of the program known as HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills). The goal of HOTS is to help kids who consistently fall behind at school learn how to think for themselves through the use of computers and “controlled floundering.” Dr. Stanley Pogrow, the founder, explains: “Traditionally, we learn to think by sitting around the table, being questioned by parents, and talking as a family. Today, who has time for sit-down meals? Yet, this critical stage of development cannot be bypassed...So what is the solution?...Bring dinner table conversation to school. That’s what HOTS does!”⁵

Sadly, the HOTS program exists to fill a void left by parents who no longer see the importance of spending time together as a family. When parents give up these responsibilities, no matter what the age(s) of their kids, others—by default—take over. In today’s rapidly changing youth culture, we hand over the parenting reins to a variety of institutions, including the school, church, media, advertising, coaches, and so on. Sure, some of these institutions are well intentioned and they really do care for kids. But they can never replace the role parents must play in the lives of their teenagers.

In the same way God gives parents the gift of kids, he gives kids the gift of parents who will love and nurture them. Scripture clearly states that parents are to exercise their parental responsibilities by spending time with their kids, and that includes teaching them God’s will and way (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). Raising teenagers requires a diligent and unwavering investment of *all* our resources. And lest parents should fall into the trap of thinking teenagers don’t *want* their investment of time, guidance, and direction—they should think again. Teenagers can be viewed as distinct lumps of clay that God has entrusted us with, and he has an individual plan for each one. Like the lumps of clay spinning on a potter’s wheel, no two start out alike. And by the time the potter is finished, each will become a unique cup, vase, plate, pot, or bowl.

I've had the privilege of watching my own four lumps of clay grow and take their unique shapes over the years. When they were little, I wondered what they'd end up like when all was said and done. Yet, in the midst of that wondering, I knew God had chosen my wife and me to be stewards of this sacred trust. As parents, we have the awesome task of cooperating with God to mold and shape those lumps under his guidance.

A potter is committed to shaping that lump of clay. If she makes a mistake, she reworks the clay, rather than giving up on it. What would happen to the clay if the potter decided she didn't want to work with it any more and suddenly threw it out the window? Its destiny would vary, depending on where it landed. It could land in the street and be run over, flattened and forgotten. It could land in the grass, only to be pounded and eroded by the elements. It could bake in the sun until all of its pliable properties disappeared. Dried and hardened, it could never be worked again. All too often, teenagers meet such fates due to parental neglect. It's as if they've been thrown out the window and left to whatever fate befalls them. I know this is true because I've met far too many of these abandoned lumps of clay over the years.

But when the potter keeps the clay in her hands, working and reworking it with tender care, it eventually turns into a beautiful and unique piece of pottery. So it should be with our kids. They must grow up knowing Mom and Dad are loving, hands-on kind of people who eagerly fulfill their God-given responsibilities to raise their kids.

Any Kid, Anywhere, Anytime

During a youth culture seminar I was leading a few years back, I made an effort to help parents and youth workers see that a variety of factors combine in our world to make the voice of the culture far more compelling and attractive to kids. I told them it doesn't matter where they live, whom they live with, or what kind of school they go to. Any kid living anywhere can be influenced by the negative and dangerous aspects of our culture at any time. No church, school, family, or child is immune. To my surprise, many

in the audience protested this message and refused to believe it was true.

In November 2005, a friend called me to ask what role, if any, the Center for Parent Youth Understanding was playing in the unfolding story of a double murder that had occurred on a quiet Sunday morning in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. A local 18-year-old had allegedly shot and killed the parents of his 14-year-old girlfriend. Then the pair took off to get married and start a new life, only to be caught a day later in Indiana. The story was loaded with the kind of dramatic twists and turns that make news producers and networks drool. They told the story over and over in typical soap opera fashion: a forbidden love affair, a double murder, a kidnapping, access to the kids through their online blogs, their “religious” backgrounds, a multistate manhunt, and their history as homeschooled kids. Nonstop news network coverage featured the “expert” pontificators speculating, as usual, in a manner that told the story long before the story was even known.

“We’re not involved,” I replied.

“Well, what do you think of it all?” he asked.

I answered, “Sad, but not surprising.” I didn’t know the families, nor did I know enough about their backgrounds to make comments on the tragedy. However, this situation and the specifics as we knew them prompted some thoughts that have continued to evolve as I study the Scriptures and observe our Christian subculture. For years we’ve been challenging Christian parents to stay in touch with teenagers and their world. To believe our faith somehow insulates them from the realities of the world is both pragmatically and theologically wrong. Like it or not, we live in the culture and that culture influences and affects us all. There’s no escaping it. And there isn’t supposed to be a way out. Like it or not, God doesn’t want us circling the wagons or living in some kind of a bubble in an effort to keep ourselves pure. Jesus prayed the will of the Father the night before his death—that his disciples in all times and in all places would be in the world (living as salt and light) while not living as though they’re of the world (John 17). That’s not only how we should be living, but it’s how we should be preparing our students to live every day of their lives.

Believe it or not, to assume you've somehow made kids immune to the influence of culture just by shielding them from culture might just produce the opposite effect. In other words, by not preparing them to engage the culture with minds and hearts saturated by a biblical world- and life view, we actually make them more vulnerable to the negative cultural forces they face both now and for the rest of their lives. Both we (parents and youth workers) and our kids need to be wise to the Scriptures and streetwise about our culture. Just like he did with his son Jesus, God has made us all particular types of people who do his particular work in the particular time and place where he's placed us.

Over the years I've been questioned by a growing number of pastors and youth workers who are dealing with a segment of Christians who resist this approach and even believe it's morally, ethically, and biblically wrong. Sorry, I don't see it. I feel even more sorry for their kids. I love what theologian John Stott says about every Christian's call to become a double-listener: "Christian witnesses stand between the Word and the world, with the consequent obligation to listen to both. We listen to the Word in order to discover ever more of the riches of Christ. And we listen to the world in order to discern which of Christ's riches are needed most and how to present them in their best light."⁶

This is our calling as parents and youth workers, and, consequently, it's also the calling of our kids. When it comes to teenagers and their culture, what we don't know (or don't want to know or refuse to know) *can* hurt them.

They Long for God

Blaise Pascal described a universal hole in the soul as a God-shaped vacuum. Alister McGrath describes Pascal's model as "a God-shaped emptiness within us, which only God can fill. We may try to fill it in other ways and with other things. Yet one of the few certainties of life is that nothing in this world satisfies our longing for something that is ultimately beyond this world."⁷

Teenagers are no different from anyone else. Their great need is to have this God-shaped emptiness filled by God. If you listen

and look closely, you'll see and hear that their music, films, books, magazines, and very lives are crying out for spiritual wholeness.

Over the years I've had the privilege of working with thousands of teenagers. I can't remember a single one who didn't exhibit this thirst for God. Each of us can look directly into the eyes of the teenagers we know and love and be certain this is their reality, too. Even when they don't recognize it as such, we can rest in the assurance their hunger is for heaven. John Stott reminds us that even when they're running away from God, they know they "have no other resting-place, no other home."⁸ This fact should spur us on to constantly and consciously serve as signposts, pointing them to the cross that leads them to their true home.

Your Teenagers Are in Process

Now that three of my children have moved out of adolescence, I'm realizing they didn't come equipped with a switch or button that can be tripped or pushed to make them accept, embrace, and believe everything I tell them. Instead, I need to allow them to grow just as I was allowed to grow. Their intellectual, physical, and spiritual development are all ongoing processes. They don't happen instantaneously or overnight. Our role is to consistently model and speak truth into their lives. Then we must allow the Holy Spirit to do the work that only he can do. We serve to guide and direct. God's Spirit works to bring about change and growth at just the right time, and does so over the course of time. We can't do what only God can do.

A couple of years ago, my then-17-year-old daughter Bethany was struggling with a friendship issue in school. Aware of the problem, I stepped in to make a few fatherly pronouncements that I thought served as a good perspective and great advice. In fact, I remembered saying the same things to my older daughter, Caitlin, when she faced a similar problem at age 17. I shouldn't have been surprised by what seemed to be Bethany's rejection of my perspective and advice. Caitlin had reacted the same way just a few years before. But I was encouraged when I later overheard Bethany sharing her problem with Caitlin and soliciting her older sister's advice. What advice did Caitlin give her? Amazingly, it was the same advice I'd given to Bethany. In fact, it was the same advice Caitlin had seemingly rejected just a few years before.

While I hate cheesy bumper sticker sayings, there's one that speaks to all of us who love and work with teenagers: "Be patient. God isn't finished with me yet." Never stop speaking and living truth into teenagers' lives. But don't be surprised if they don't immediately care to hear or embrace what you're saying. Always remember they're in process. Prayerfully expect God to open their eyes at just the right time, a time that may, in fact, be pretty far down the road.

Helpless Is a Good Place to Be

The words of Psalm 13 came to have deep and significant meaning for me over the course of several dark and seemingly endless nights. One of my kids had made a series of poor choices. Now that child's world was shattered and a deep price was being paid. Feeling as though I'd just survived a horrible train wreck, my mind was filled with questions. *How could this happen? Why did this happen? Have I done anything to cause this? God, what are you trying to teach us? God, do you even care? Will my child get through this?*

Helpless might be the best word I can find to describe that feeling. If you're anything like me, you like to be in control. But when that sense of being in control starts to unravel, life spins around so fast that we don't have a clue what to do. The first four verses of Psalm 13 record the words of a helpless person longing for answers and hope:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

For several nights, my helplessness allowed me to read only these verses. It wasn't until a few days later that I began to understand in the midst of my helplessness that God was seeking to be my help. Then I was able to join with the psalmist in celebrating God's goodness through the next two verses of Psalm 13: "But I trust in

your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me.”

When I look back on the difficult times in my life and in my journey as a parent and youth worker, I sometimes wonder if I could rewind and do it all over again, would I choose to change the circumstances and events so I’d never be reduced to a sense of helplessness? The answer is *no*. You see, in the midst of our helplessness, God comes to us and reminds us of our need to exercise total dependence on him. He’s faithful, promising us the precise measure of grace we need to endure and overcome in times of trial. Suffering and helplessness are redemptive as God does his work in us.

In his encouraging and vulnerable book *Come Back Barbara*, Jack Miller recounts years of helpless struggle as a pastor-father whose compliant and seemingly Christian daughter, Barbara, heads off to college and turns her back on her faith. In the book, Miller tells the heartbreaking story of his struggle to make sense of what was happening in Barbara’s life. In the end, Miller and his wife realize Barbara was never a follower of Christ in the first place. She’d simply been outwardly compliant without ever having experienced the rebirth of her heart. Eventually, after years of extreme rebellion against God and her parents, Barbara’s life is transformed as she turns to faith and is reconciled with her father.

In hindsight Miller recognizes that Barbara’s life wasn’t the only one in which God was hard at work. He writes, “So our story comes to its climax with this perception: What seemed to be a tragic defeat for us as parents turned into an unprecedented opportunity to grow and mature as Christians and to learn extraordinary things about God and his ways.”⁹

It’s inevitable that you’ll receive the gift of difficult times. The sixteenth-century English preacher John Fox wrote, “The best teachers are trouble and affliction. These alone give us understanding. How can we feel God’s goodness when nothing has troubled us and no danger hangs over our heads?”¹⁰ From a human perspective, these are the times when God does his best work in our lives. The growing up of our children is an opportunity for us to grow up. So if helplessness comes your way—embrace it.

Give the Grace You've Been Given

My heavenly Father has showered me with tremendous amounts of love and amazing grace. I agree with the apostle Paul, who wrote, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8), and “The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1 Timothy 1:14-15). Since I’ve been the recipient of abundant grace, why have I been far less than graceful with my own kids so many times? When they mess up or do something wrong, I’m quick to jump down their throats, condemning both them and their sins. Then I’m reminded of what Christ has done for me in his mercy and grace, and I’m put to shame.

I once heard an unforgettable lesson from Dr. John White, who was asked how he managed to relate to his own wayward son. White said he’d learned to live his life according to this simple yet profound principle: “As Christ is to me, so must I be to my kids.”

When mistakes, difficulty, and rebellion rear their ugly heads—and they will—remember how your heavenly Father has treated you. If you’re like me, nothing your kids can do or say to you comes even close to your daily and habitual rebellion against your heavenly Father.

Recently one of our adult children asked to sit down with us. As our child began to speak, we quickly detected some nervousness. God’s Spirit had been working on that child’s heart for some time, prompting a confession regarding some things that had been done during high school. After sharing those things with us, we all sat together in silence. Amazingly, my mind wasn’t focused on the sin that was just confessed. Instead, God filled my mind with reminders of my own sinful rebellion, and I was reminded of my heavenly Father’s grace, which he has shown me regularly and abundantly.

Eventually I broke the silence and asked, “How do you expect your mother and me to respond?”

“I think you’re going to tell me you’re disappointed in me, and you’re angry.”

As I continued to ponder God's grace in my own life, I could only respond by saying, "I'm neither." A recipient of grace myself, I could do nothing but pour it out on my repentant child.

Never Fear

Parenting teenagers can be scary. One look at their rapidly changing world and all its pressures and choices can make parents and youth workers want to run and hide. An adult once told me that watching kids go through the teenage years is the most effective birth control method around. Yes, the teenage years are difficult for kids, parents, and youth workers. But should we be afraid?

Usually this fear manifests itself in a desire to remove our kids from the world and thereby keep them from harm. Or it immobilizes us, keeping us from fulfilling our God-given roles in our teenagers' lives. While we should be cautious, watchful, and discerning, we cannot allow ourselves to fall prey to fear.

Jesus addresses the former manifestation of fear as he prays the night before his death (John 17). His prayer is not that the Father will remove Christ's followers from the danger of the world, but that he'll protect them from harm while they serve as his ambassadors in the world. We're to be *in* but not *of* the world. John Fischer suggests "we as Christians need to learn to¹¹ the danger of living in a dangerous world and trust not a safe subculture to protect us, but a praying Savior ...We want to be safe in a safer world; God wants us to be safe in an unsafe world. We want to protect ourselves from danger; God wants to protect us in the middle of danger."¹²

We've Been Given a "Punkuss"

When my son Josh was five years old, I took an extended 10-day trip to speak in the Southeast. Sadly anticipating my departure, Josh started to get antsy the day before I left. As I sat in my recliner and read the morning paper, he ran in a circle from the living room, through the dining room, kitchen, and hallway, and then back to the living room again. Each time he passed by, my paper blew in the breeze. On one of his laps, I looked up long enough to see him stop, get down on his hands and knees, and look frantically under the couch. Not finding what he was looking for, he got up and

continued running. My curiosity finally got the better of me, and I asked him what he was doing.

“I’m looking for something, Dad...something I want to give you before you go away on your trip!”

I went back to reading my paper while his frantic search took him upstairs. Soon I heard drawers and closets opening and closing.

“What are you looking for, Josh? Maybe I can help you,” I yelled.

“The tire pointer, Dad. You know, that punkuss. I’ll find it.”

I had no clue what he was talking about. A few minutes passed, and his search brought him back downstairs. Then he yelled with excitement—he’d found the object of his hunt. Seconds later he climbed on my lap.

“Dad, I want you to take this with you when you go on your trip.” In his hand was a tiny dime-store compass set in a miniature tire.

“Why do you want me to have this, Josh?”

“Because, Dad, you’re going away for 10 days. I want you to keep my punkuss in your pocket so you know where you’re from, where you belong, and how to get back home.”

Tears filled my eyes. I wasn’t scheduled to leave until the next day, and already I felt as though I’d been gone too long. I kept that “punkuss” in my pocket the entire time I was gone.

Life is a mysterious journey. I’ve been on mine for more than 50 years. And just when I begin to discover the answers to some of my questions, I enter a new phase of the journey with its own set of confusing choices and circumstances. And the questions keep coming. The confusion never lifts.

Whether we’re kids, teenagers, or adults, we all look to some higher authority for answers. That authority, be it a friend, parent, spouse, writer, film star, musician, self, or even our changing opinions, becomes our “punkuss” and directs our steps as we try to figure out where we’re from, where we belong, and how to get back there.

In a world where there are many “experts” sharing conflicting opinions on the purpose of life, how to live our lives, and how to raise and relate to kids, it’s good to know there is a “punkuss” we can trust, one that was handed to us by the One who created life, kids, teenagers, parents, families, and youth workers. That “punkuss” is the Word—both the incarnate Word Jesus Christ and the written Word. Together, the example of Christ and God’s revelation of himself in the Bible reveal what we need to know about everything we encounter on the journey.

The words of the apostle Paul to Timothy, a young man who needed encouragement, apply not only to Timothy’s life and ministry, but also to us today as we fulfill our God-given ministry in parenting or ministering to kids: “Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way” (2 Timothy 3:16, *The Message*).

When each of our kids graduated from high school, we used the space allotted to us in their yearbooks to send them messages, including these words from Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” When one of my kids was going through an especially difficult crisis as a late teen, a helper who entered into the crisis communicated these words from Jeremiah 29:11: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” The process of restoring hope and bringing healing had begun.

Prayer Is an Amazing Mystery

Early on in my own life, I viewed and practiced prayer as though I were entering into an arm-wrestling match with God. I believed if I prayed hard enough for something, God would eventually give in and I’d win. As the years have passed, I’ve now realized prayer is a lifestyle where we constantly enter into the presence of God whether our lives are marked by plenty or want, peace or conflict, joy or sorrow. W. Bingham Hunter describes prayer as “a means God uses to give us what he wants.”¹³ To believe prayer changes things is to believe that the “things” prayer changes are our own hearts. While the workings of prayer remain an amazing mystery to me, I’ve

experienced the joy of seeing lives—including my own and those of my kids—changed in significant ways through prayer.

Stanley Grenz describes prayer as “the cry for the Kingdom.” In other words, “just as the petition ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ formed the heart of Jesus’ praying, so also in every situation the petitions of Jesus’ friends ought to be a cry for the in-breaking of God’s rulership, God’s will, into our world.”¹⁴

As adults helping teenagers into adulthood, we must pray for ourselves, our kids, and our families. These prayers shouldn’t come only when crisis or difficulty hits. Instead, we should consistently ask God to unleash his will and way on us. As we pray for teenagers, we must ask God to reveal his will and way to them in a manner that transforms their lives into the image of Christ.

Perhaps sometimes we try to do the work of the Holy Spirit in our kid’s lives by trying to control their hearts. But we can’t drag our kids screaming and kicking into God’s Kingdom. God and God alone changes the heart. May we all rely on God to bring about change, always asking him to move in our teenagers’ hearts.

We’ve Been Given All We Need

During my college years, I loved to watch *Saturday Night Live*. The late Gilda Radner had a repertoire of hilarious characters that included the television commentator Rosanne Rosanna Danna. Somehow Rosanne could always insert her trademark line into every weekly commentary. Maybe she was really speaking for parents whenever she’d say, “It’s always something!”

But in the middle of teenage chaos, this fact speaks reassuringly from the pages of God’s Word: Although his people often experienced great hardship and difficulty, they were always loved and provided for by a gracious God who never turned his back on them. Read the accounts of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Examine the lives of Noah, David, Ruth, and Joshua. Listen to the laments of the psalmist. Look at the experience of the prophets. Read the words of the Gospel writers and the apostle Paul. Peruse the records of Jesus’ encounters with the people of his day. Then think about your experiences raising or working with teenagers. It’s

good to know God is still active and he makes available all of the resources we need—in the proper measure and time—to guide and raise our teenagers according to his blueprint. I've learned firsthand that if courage and wisdom are needed, God provides it. The key is to seek his will through his Word first, and then conform our thoughts and actions to his will and his way. It sounds almost too simple. Yet, this unexplainable mystery of grace is true.

I've also learned it's easy to forget that I'm a dependent person who was created and is loved by a dependable God. This is why Paul, while talking about his "thorn in the flesh" and other hardships, could enthusiastically say that in the midst of weakness, God's grace is sufficient to meet every need (2 Corinthians 12:9). And while God never promised we'd be immune to life's difficulties, he did promise we wouldn't be overcome by them (Psalm 91).

Getting Personal

Think for a moment about how you handle the trying times parenting throws your way. If you're involved in youth ministry or some other activity with teenagers, think about the hard times you've encountered in that role. Can you say like the apostle Paul: "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me" (Colossians 1:28-29)? What role do you allow God to play?

I know all too well from my own history and experiences that I sometimes fail to live in total dependence on God. I've tried to parent my teenage children and minister to other teenagers with my own efforts and willpower. When I do, I find myself tired, burned out, and defeated.

I've also made the mistake of "letting go and letting God." After all, if he's in control, what good will it do if I try to help? Let him raise the kids.

And who of us hasn't worked hard to manage our lives and families on our own strength, only to cry out to God, "Lord, help me!" when a crisis hits?

But true total dependence on God requires that we recognize our need to have our lives radically reoriented and reorganized by God. We need God's guidance and enabling every minute of every day in every area of our lives. Entering into God's presence daily to study and meditate on his Word and then seeking his will through prayer allows us to parent in faith with his strength.

I'll be the first to admit that parenting teenagers is hard work and involves many struggles. But through constant, active dependence on the God who never changes, we can live through and embrace the wonder, joy, ups, and downs of parenting through the teenage years. And we can experience the joy of letting God work powerfully in and through us to affect the world—through our teenagers.