

# MARRIAGE AND THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD

## Study Eight

### MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

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#### FAMILY AND THE PURPOSE OF GOD

We saw in the beginning that God as Father, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, created the universe in order to have a great family of children who would be holy and blameless before Him in love, and so who could participate fully with Him in all that He is doing.<sup>1</sup> We have been saying all along that marriage relates directly with God's purpose for His creation, to reflect and participate in it. So far we have focussed mainly on the relationship of a husband and wife with each other.<sup>2</sup> In this final study we consider how a husband and wife having children relates to the purpose of God, and how the families that result relate with the ultimate family of God, which is the great goal of God's purpose in all things.

Integral and essential to God's original creational mandate, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion' (Genesis 1:28), is having children and bringing them up. We saw in Study Two that it is more than just that, as a thing in itself—which would be a rather pointless exercise—but that we are to do this in a fruitful way, that participates in and even helps to further the loving purpose of God for His whole creation. How then do we raise families that are doing that?

#### **Questions for discussion**

- *What have we seen of the experience, on the part of ourselves or others, of having children and bringing them up? What issues has this presented to us? How does it relate to the purpose of God?*

#### FAMILY AND COVENANT

God is 'Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name' (Ephesians 3:14–15), or from whom all family-type relationships are derived. Our relationships with

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<sup>1</sup> See Study One, pp. 4–5; Study Two, pp. 10–12.

<sup>2</sup> We may have noticed, for instance, that the *Song of Songs* makes no reference at all to having children: so much for the notion that sexual intercourse should be used for procreation only, as some Christians have held!

each other are dependent upon and are sustained by God's own relational nature within Himself ('God is love') and God's relationship with us. In the Bible, this relationship is spelled out in terms of the 'covenant' that God has undertaken, out of His own relational being as Father, Son and Spirit, with all that He has made, and particularly with us who are to belong to God in His family.<sup>3</sup> Marriage is seen in the Bible as an expression of the covenant of our God (see Proverbs 2:16–17). God in His covenant relationship with us is also intent upon generations of families. God gave a revelation of His covenant being and action to Moses at Mount Sinai:

The LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children  
and the children's children,  
to the third and the fourth generation (Exodus 34:6–7).

In Exodus 20:4–6 God had made clear that 'visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children' applies to those who persist in hating or rejecting God. Those who turn to God and continue to love and obey Him will know God's steadfast love to thousands of generations, without a break necessarily. In those generations that continue to hate God, sin and its judgement will be repeated in each generation. Even here, God in His mercy puts a limit on that: within the covenant people, hatred of God will last no longer than three or four generations. In the third or fourth generation, there will be someone who, almost inexplicably, turns back to love God.<sup>4</sup> This turning back, at any time, is purely by the grace-action and merciful love of God. But at any time, without waiting for the third or fourth

<sup>3</sup> See further: William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* (Paternoster Press Exeter, 1984); Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Love's Most Glorious Covenant: Studies in Covenant Theology* (Redeemer Baptist Press, Castle Hill, 1997); *Comprehending the Covenant* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> There is one family in the Bible we can trace to find that this is so: the royal household of David in Judah, where a distinction is made in each case between those who 'did what is right in the eyes of the LORD' and those who 'did evil'. At no point did those who 'did evil' persist beyond the third generation:

Rehoboam	evil	(1 Kings 14:22)
Abijah	evil	(1 Kings 15:3)
Asa	right	(1 Kings 15:11)
Jehoshaphat	right	(1 Kings 22:45)
Jehoram	evil	(2 Kings 8:18)
Ahaziah	evil	(2 Kings 8:27)
[Athaliah	evil	(2 Kings 11:1)]
Joash	right	(2 Kings 12:2)
Amaziah	right	(2 Kings 14:3)
Azariah (Uzziah)	right	(2 Kings 15:3)
Jotham	right	(2 Kings 15:34)
Ahaz	evil	(2 Kings 16:2)
Hezekiah	right	(2 Kings 18:3)
Manasseh	evil	(2 Kings 21:2)
Amon	evil	(2 Kings 21:20)
Josiah	right	(2 Kings 22:2)
Jehoahaz	evil	(2 Kings 23:32)
Jehoiakim (Eliakim, son of Josiah)	evil	(2 Kings 23:37)
Jehoiachin	evil	(2 Kings 24:9)
Zedekiah (Mattaniah, son of Josiah)	evil	(2 Kings 24:19)

generation, anyone who will can turn to the love of God, and know His steadfast love for thousands of unbroken generations.<sup>5</sup>

God's covenant undertaking with Israel, with a view to His covenant with all the earth, is that there should be atonement for sins and a relationship with God in obedience that prevails 'throughout your generations'. This is repeated many times. For instance, with reference to the altar of incense:

Once a year Aaron shall perform the rite of atonement on its horns. Throughout your generations he shall perform the atonement for it once a year with the blood of the atoning sin offering (Exodus 30:10).

So also, under the new covenant in Christ:

His mercy is on those who fear him  
from generation to generation (Luke 1:50).

As Peter said on the day of Pentecost concerning baptism into Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit:

For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him (Acts 2:39).

Records of the generations of humanity feature prominently in the Biblical text. There are genealogies that expand to encompass whole nations,<sup>6</sup> or that narrow down to particular individuals.<sup>7</sup> It is as if each one is numbered by God, and of intimate concern to Him. This is the context in which we must understand having children and bringing them up.<sup>8</sup>

We have a wonderful picture of this in the upbringing of Timothy, son of a Hebrew mother and a Greek father (see Acts 16:1–4), to whom Paul the apostle wrote:

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord . . . But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:5–8; 3:14–15).

Timothy himself was to be caught up in that process of passing it on:

You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well (2 Timothy 2:1–2).

This was very much in the spirit of Psalm 78:

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<sup>5</sup> See this principle worked through also in Ezekiel 18; 33:10–20. This is the decisive answer to any who may set store by the adverse influence of so-called 'generational curses'. Our dealings are directly with God, in the fullness of His gracious and righteous mercy to us in Christ.

<sup>6</sup> Such as the descendants of Noah in Genesis 10, or the extensive genealogies in 1 Chronicles 1–9, which helped the returned exiles from Babylon to know their place in the context of God's dealings with the whole of humanity.

<sup>7</sup> Such as Abraham, Genesis 11:10–32; Moses and Aaron, Exodus 6:14–27; Jesus, Matthew 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38.

<sup>8</sup> See Grant Thorpe, *Christian Parents and Their Children* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2004), which sets raising families firmly in the covenant of God: 'parents must know God as their Father, and as the Father of their children. Parents who know the gracious and firm dealings of God with themselves represent this to their children. In this way, children will learn that they have to do, not just with their parents but with God' (taken from the back cover). This is also available on cassette and DVD.

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;  
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.  
I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings from of old,  
things that we have heard and known,  
that our ancestors have told us.  
We will not hide them from their children;  
we will tell to the coming generation  
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,  
and the wonders that he has done.

He established a decree in Jacob,  
and appointed a law in Israel,  
which he commanded our ancestors  
to teach to their children;  
that the next generation might know them,  
the children yet unborn,  
and rise up and tell them to their children,  
so that they should set their hope in God,  
and not forget the works of God,  
but keep his commandments;  
and that they should not be like their ancestors,  
a stubborn and rebellious generation,  
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,  
whose spirit was not faithful to God (Psalm 78:1–8).

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What are God's dealings with the generations of humanity? What difference does it make to see our family relationships and responsibilities in the context of the covenant of God?*

## **FAMILIES AND THE LOVE OF GOD**

The solid grounding of all family life and child-rearing in Israel was this:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone [or *The LORD our God, the LORD is one* (compare Mark 12:29)]. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4–9).

This is the complete guide to child rearing. Love for God and the keeping of His commandments is to be at the centre of family life. It is to be held in the heart. It is also to be spoken of at all times, home and away, every evening and every morning. It is to characterise everything we do and think ('hand' and 'forehead'). It is to end up suffusing even the physical fabric of our homes and properties ('doorposts' and 'gates'). There is nothing more thoroughgoing in family life than that.

With this responsibility of parents towards children is the relationship children are to have with their parents:

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you (Exodus 20:12).

Length of days is promised to those who are in right relationship with their parents in this way. This may not just mean that individual persons will live longer lives—perhaps because right relationships of children with their parents will be more stress-free—but it may be a promise to the whole nation, that these right relationships will keep the nation trouble-free as far as the judgements of God are concerned, and they would not be taken into exile as long as these right relationships were in place. Certainly one of the sins that brought on the demise of Israel was the sacrificing of children by their parents to gain some supposed advantage for themselves (see Psalm 106:37–38). This was turned back upon them as judgement in horrific ways: the helpless dismembering of families, and the fearful consuming by parents of their own children’s flesh (see Deuteronomy 28:32, 53–57).<sup>9</sup> No wonder a key agenda for the restoration of this exiled and subjugated people would be to ‘turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse’ (Malachi 4:6). These final words in the whole of the Old Testament are taken up in the New Testament to speak of the ministry of the Messiah and his precursor:

He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:16–17).

We are told something of Jesus’ own relationship with his parents, as he was growing up:

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor (Luke 2:51–52).

This was not all plain sailing for his parents, as we shall see, as Jesus put being about his heavenly Father’s business before his relationship with his earthly parents (see Luke 2:48–50; compare John 2:1–5).

The command to honour parents, and the promise that goes with it, is picked up in the New Testament epistles:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’—this is the first commandment with a promise: ‘so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth’ (Ephesians 6:1–3).

This goes hand in hand with the parents’—in this instance particularly the father’s—responsibility towards the children:

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart (Colossians 3:20–21).

Note here that fathers have a particular responsibility to see that they do not drive their children to anger or discouragement. Note also how for both children and parents the central common focus is to be their primary relationship with the Lord.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Horrific as that may seem to us, how different is that from an abortion rate in Australia of 20% of all pregnancies? (2006 figures; see <[www.johnstonsarchive.net/policy/abortion/ab-australia.html](http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/policy/abortion/ab-australia.html)> accessed 24th November 2008).

<sup>10</sup> See further Martin Bleby, *Power in Relationships: Issues of Love and Control* (NCPI Blackwood, 2008), especially chapter 9.

An interesting sidelight is this comment from Paul:

children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children (2 Corinthians 12:14).

Admittedly Paul is speaking about his relationship with the Corinthians as their spiritual ‘father’, but he cites it as a principle. This is very counter-cultural in a world where many societies are geared towards children providing superannuation-type benefits for their parents, undergirded by the worship of forebears. Could it be that Paul is articulating a new dynamic that has come into the world with the revelation in Christ of the ‘one God and Father of all’ (Ephesians 4:6), from whom comes ‘every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift’ (James 1:17), who is now the model of true parenting? As has always been the case: ‘The good leave an inheritance to their children’s children’ (Proverbs 13:22).

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What experiences have we had of family life suffused with the love of God?*
- *What experiences have we had of families being broken up or falling apart?*
- *What is distinctive about the ways Christian parents are to care and provide for their children?*

## **FAMILY LIFE IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS**

Given these few but significant references, we may think there is not much in the Bible about parenting—until we come to the book of Proverbs. The format of the whole book is teaching and advice of parents to their children:

Hear, my child, your father’s instruction,  
and do not reject your mother’s teaching (Proverbs 1:8).

My child, keep your father’s commandment,  
and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.  
Bind them upon your heart always;  
tie them around your neck.  
When you walk, they will lead you;  
when you lie down, they will watch over you;  
and when you awake, they will talk with you (Proverbs 6:20–22).

Those who do violence to their father and chase away their mother  
are children who cause shame and bring reproach.  
Cease straying, my child, from the words of knowledge,  
in order that you may hear instruction (Proverbs 19:26–27).

Train children in the right way,  
and when old, they will not stray (Proverbs 22:6).

Listen to your father who begot you,  
and do not despise your mother when she is old.  
Buy truth, and do not sell it;  
buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding.  
The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice;  
he who begets a wise son will be glad in him.  
Let your father and mother be glad;  
let her who bore you rejoice (Proverbs 23:22–25).

The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him (Proverbs 31:1).

Thus the book of Proverbs is one massive parenting manual, and is worth reading right through as such. It covers the whole of life, and engenders wisdom of character in both parents and children alike, through a healthy ‘fear of the LORD’ (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). It is a practical exposition of the heart of Israel’s law in Deuteronomy 6:4–9: ‘love the LORD your God’.

Discipline of children is enjoined:

Those who spare the rod hate their children,  
but those who love them are diligent to discipline them (Proverbs 13:24).

Do not withhold discipline from your children;  
if you beat them with a rod, they will not die.  
If you beat them with the rod,  
you will save their lives from Sheol.  
My child, if your heart is wise,  
my heart too will be glad.  
My soul will rejoice  
when your lips speak what is right (Proverbs 23:13–16).

While these references to the ‘rod’ of discipline have been used to justify unmitigated corporal punishment, the injunction not to provoke children to anger or discouragement needs to be borne in mind. The absence of any consistent discipline, however, leads to constant tension and grief:

Discipline your children, and they will give you rest;  
they will give delight to your heart (Proverbs 29:17).

Our discipline is to be in the light of God’s disciplining of us as our Father:

My child, do not despise the LORD’s discipline  
or be weary of his reproof,  
for the LORD reproves the one he loves,  
as a father the son in whom he delights (Proverbs 3:11–12).

This is picked up in the New Testament:

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—  
‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
or lose heart when you are punished by him;  
for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,  
and chastises every child whom he accepts.’

Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:5–11).

We are to parent our children as we ourselves are parented by God.

### **Questions for discussion**

- *How does seeing the book of Proverbs as a ‘parenting manual’ change our understanding and appreciation of it?*
- *How does knowing and living with God as our Father affect the way we parent our children?*

## DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES IN THE BIBLE

Considering all this good advice and proper modelling, we may be disturbed to find that a high proportion of prominent families in the Bible are sadly dysfunctional. Yet, given what we have already seen of ‘stubborn and rebellious’ generations, we should not be surprised. Adam and Eve’s eldest son murdered their second born (see Genesis 4:8). Noah ‘became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent’, and was subjected to lewdness on the part of one of his sons (see Genesis 9:20–27). Abraham and Sarah, through their foolishness, ended up with a mixed family, which gave rise to bullying and banishment (see Genesis 21:8–14). Abraham’s nephew Lot, rescued by God, fathered his progeny in a drunken stupor through incestuous relationships with his own daughters (see Genesis 19:30–38). Isaac’s favouring of Esau and Rebekah’s siding with Jacob occasioned bitter rivalry between the two brothers (see Genesis 25:19–34; 27:1–28:9). Jacob’s favouring of his son Joseph, along with the young Joseph’s rather insufferable superiority, led Joseph’s brothers to want to kill him, or at least dispose of him (see Genesis 37). Miriam and Aaron took exception to their brother Moses’ conduct, and sought to usurp his leadership (see Numbers 12). The great king David’s adultery with Bathsheba and his murdering of her husband Uriah brought open shame and blood-shedding violence upon his whole family, which David was then too compromised or weak to address rightly (see 2 Samuel 11:1–19:8). And so it went on.

Yet all this tells only one part of the story. Each of these were chosen, called, and mightily used by God in His purpose, and much of what they did for evil God in his mercy turned to good (see e.g. Genesis 45:8; 50:20; 2 Sam. 12:24–25). In the end, it is not how sinful we have been, but how merciful and faithful God has been, that determines the outcome. I have said it many times, and I say it again: ‘The one thing I have needed to know to be a good husband to my wife and a good father to my children is God’s great forgiveness of sins in the death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ’. His forgiveness for myself, first of all, then also for my wife and children, and for us always to live in that together. That way, none of us are stuck with what we have done wrong to each other, and all of us know together the great grace of God upon us all.

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What awareness have we had of dysfunctional relationships within our own families, and among the people of God?*
- *How in that have we known the grace and forgiveness of God?*

## THE FAMILY OF GOD

What matters in the end is not our own little families, but their place in the goal of God’s great purpose, which is the present and ultimate family of God. Jesus was part of an earthly family, and he had other brothers and sisters (see Mark 6:3). His brothers did not believe in him, though they were willing to take advantage of his fame (see John 7:1–10). At one point his family set out to restrain Jesus, because people were saying that Jesus had gone mad (see Mark 3:20–21). They caught up with him when Jesus was in a house, surrounded by a crowd of people:

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’ (Mark 3:31–35).

Those who surrounded Jesus in the house were not related with him by kinship, but he counted them as much his ‘mother and brothers’ on account of their relationship with him in the will of the Father.

As Jesus hung on the cross dying, he commended his mother to the care of his disciple John:

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home (John 19:25–27).

Mary and John were not related by blood, but from then on they were related to each other as mother and son. A whole new family was being formed at the foot of that cross, of those who related with Jesus in the saving will of God—all those who, through faith in Jesus and the forgiveness of sins that he has wrought, now have ‘access in one Spirit to the Father’. Of this family we wrote earlier:

God, as the one ‘for whom and through whom all things exist’, has the ultimate intention of ‘bringing many children to glory’ (Hebrews 2:10), as ‘a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages’, of whom God can say: ‘I will be their God and they will be my children’ (Revelation 7:9; 21:7). Those ‘who are called according to his purpose’ are ‘predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family’ (Romans 8:28–29). After his death and rising to life again, Jesus indicated that we can now know God as Father in the way he does (see John 20:17). In the end, the Son will be able to stand before the Father and say: ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me’ (Hebrews 2:13).<sup>11</sup>

This family had now come to be. As Mary Magdalene tried to take hold of the risen Jesus, he spoke these words to her:

Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’ (John 20:17).

The sonship or family belonging that the Son had always known with the God and Father of us all is now ours with him. No one now need be left fatherless or without family: ‘In you the orphan finds mercy’ (Hosea 14:3).

Jesus had promised to those who had left everything and followed him:

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:29–30).

The believers in New Testament times most often called each other ‘brethren’—brothers and sisters, fellow family members. Family belonging now determined their relationships with each other:

Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity (1 Timothy 5:1–2).

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What is good about belonging to a natural family? What are its limitations?*
- *What are the differences between belonging to a natural family and belonging to the family of God?*

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<sup>11</sup> Study One, p. 4.

## FAMILIES IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

It is this family, intent on being in and knowing and doing the will of God, that our little families must belong to, if they are to take their rightful place in the purpose of God for His creation. Billy Graham said once that one of the best things parents can do for their children is to get on with their own ministry as God gives it to them, and let the kids see that happening. That way, the kids get to know that they are not the centre of the universe after all—that there are other people in this world, and they can be in there serving them like Mum and Dad do.

Charles Spurgeon urged his people to pray for their children:

Never be content, my brethren in Christ, till all your children are saved. Lay the promise before your God. The promise is unto you and unto your children. The Greek word does not refer to infants,<sup>12</sup> but to children, grandchildren, and any descendants you may have, whether grown-up or not. Do not cease to plead till not only your children, but your great grandchildren, if you have such, are saved. I stand here today a proof that God is not untrue to his promise. I can cast my eye back through four or five generations, and see that God has been pleased to hear the prayers of our grandfather's grandfather, who used to supplicate with God that his children might live before Him to the last generation, and God has never deserted the house, but has been pleased to bring first one, and then another, to fear and love his name. So be it with you; and in asking this, you are not asking more than God is ready to give you. He cannot refuse unless he run back from his promise. He cannot refuse to give you both your own and your children's souls as an answer to the prayer of your faith. 'Ah,' says one, 'but you do not know what children mine are.' No, my dear friend, but I do know that if you are a Christian, they are children that God has promised to bless. 'Oh, but they are such unruly ones, they break my heart.' Then pray God to break their hearts, and they will not break yours any more. 'But they will bring my grey hairs with sorrow to the grave.' Pray God, then, that he may bring their eyes with sorrow to prayer, and to supplication, and to the cross, and then they will not bring you to the grave. 'But,' you say, 'my children have such hard hearts.' Look at your own. You think they cannot be saved: look at yourselves; he that saved you can save them. Go to him in prayer, and say, 'Lord, I will not let thee go except thou bless me'; and if thy child be at the point of death, and, as you think, at the point of damnation on account of sin, still plead like the nobleman, 'Lord, come down ere my child perish, and save him for thy mercy's sake.' And, oh, Thou that dwellest in the highest heavens thou wilt ne'er refuse thy people. Be it far from us to dream that thou wilt forget thy promise. In the name of all thy people, we put our hand upon thy Word most solemnly, and pledge thee to thy covenant. Thou hast said thy mercy is unto the children's children of them that fear thee and keep thy commandments. Thou hast said the promise is unto us and unto our children; Lord, thou wilt not deny thine own covenant; we challenge thy word by holy faith this morning—'Do as thou hast said.' AMEN.<sup>13</sup>

Subject to God's own predestinating choice, we can make that prayer our own.

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<sup>12</sup> Spurgeon, as a Baptist, was not in favour of infant baptism.

<sup>13</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, 'Marks of Faith', in Helmut Thielicke, *Encounter with Spurgeon*, trans. by John W. Doberstein, James Clarke, Cambridge, 1978, pp. 264–5.