**Family**

A healthy family life is one of the keys to successful living. God Himself invented the idea of family, “from Whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name” (Eph 3:15). A happy home is better than riches (Prov 17:1). Those who destroy it harm themselves (Prov 11:29).

The Bible speaks positively of family life: “Behold, children are a gift of Yahweh, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them” (Ps 127:3-5). Some mistakenly feel that children play an insignificant role in God’s plan. Due to such thinking, Jesus’ disciples tried to prevent children from coming to Him. Jesus, though, rebuked them saying, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matt 19:14).

**а. Role of the Parents**

Parents who faithfully follow the Lord can expect His blessing on their family. We first encounter this promise in the Mosaic Law. For those who are faithful to the covenant, “Blessed {shall be} the offspring of your body” (Deut 28:4). The Psalms repeatedly echo this thought: “Praise Yahweh! How blessed is the man who fears Yahweh, who greatly delights in His commandments. His descendants will be mighty on earth; the generation of the upright will be blessed” (Ps 112:1-2); “The children of Your servants will continue, and their descendants will be established before You” (Ps 102:28); and, “His descendants are a blessing” (Ps 37:26). The Proverbs continue this theme: “The tent of the upright will flourish” (Prov 14:11); “The descendants of the righteous will be delivered” (Prov 11:21). On the other hand, “The descendants of the wicked will be cut off” (Ps 37:28).

Although the Bible records barrenness among God’s people, God also intervened to give children to Sarah (Gen 17:15-16), Rebekah (Gen 25:21), Rachel (Gen 30:22), Hannah (1 Sam 1:20), the wife of Manoah (Judg 13:3), Elizabeth (Lk 1:13), and others.

God’s Word stresses that fathers should instruct their children in the ways of the Lord. Both testaments contain this exhortation:

- You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up (Deut 6:7; сf. Deut 6:20-23; 11:19; Joel 1:3).

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

The mother is also to participate in the spiritual nurture of children, especially when the father is an unbeliever. Paul’s gospel coworker, Timothy, was raised under the godly influence of his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois (2 Tim 1:5). In 1 Corinthians 7:14, Paul writes that a believing wife exerts a sanctifying influence on her children. Hannah dedicated her son to the Lord (1 Sam 1:24-28), and he became the great prophet Samuel.

God’s Word promises that the spiritual instruction received in the home will remain with the child: “Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov 22:6).[[1]](#footnote-1) Moreover, in Old Testament times a father influenced the spiritual health of the family in other ways as well. Job, for example, made sacrifices for his children in case they had sinned in some manner (Job 1:4-5). According to Mosaic Law, a father could annul an inappropriate vow made by his daughter (Num 30:3-5).

Along with instruction in the Word, parents are obliged to discipline their children. The Proverbs abound with such exhortations: “He who withholds his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently” (Prov 13:25), and “Discipline your son while there is hope, and do not desire his death” (Prov 19:18; сf. 19:19; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15). The life of David exhibits the tragic consequences of failing to adequately discipline one’s children (see 1 Kin 1:5-6).

Nevertheless, in Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21 Paul warns fathers not to exacerbate their children. A father who is overly demanding or insensitive to his children can, in the end, embitter them and incite them to rebel against his authority. A father must act wisely – to instruct without being heavy handed.

The biblical portrait of the father also portrays him as the provider for the home. Elimelech is a worthy example, who left his home country during a famine to provide for his family in the land of Moab (Ruth 1:1-2). In addition, a father defends his family. We note how Jacob went on before his wife and children to meet Esau, whom he feared might do harm to them (Gen 33).

The Bible assigns to the wife the special role of caring for the physical needs of the home. They serve as hostesses of the home and direct its operations (1 Tim 5:14; Тit 2:4-5). Although the working wife has become fashionable in modern times, she must not allow outside involvements to cause her to neglect home and family.

A mother naturally possesses a special attachment to her children. We observe this when Solomon resolved a conflict between two women claiming the same child as their own (1 Kin 3:26-27). Additionally, although she was not her actual descendant, Naomi demonstrated exceptional care for her daughter-in-law, Ruth (Ruth 3:1).

Scripture records several unfortunate instances where parents mistreated their children. The Mosaic Law, for example, forbade child-sacrifice (Lev 20:1-5), a practice of that time in pagan religions. We read of the unthinkable act of eating one’s offspring in time of famine (2 Kin 6:28-29). In another instance, a man of Ephraim, who received a Levite as a guest, offered to a mob of homosexuals his own daughters instead of his guest (Judg 19:22-24). Moreover, although such an act was never forbidden, some fathers abused their daughters by offering them as a reward for some service done for them (Judg 1:12-14; Josh 15:16; 1 Sam 18:17, etc.).

Problems also arise when parents show favoritism to a certain child.[[2]](#footnote-2) This was the case with Esau and Jacob (Gen 25:28; сf. chp. 27) and between the sons of Jacob (Gen 37:3ff). It is very possible that the special attention Jacob paid to Benjamin (Gen 42) led to the loose behavior of his descendants (Judg 19-21).

In spite of the mistakes and offenses done by parents in child raising, God’s redemptive purpose for the family remains: “He will restore the hearts of the fathers to {their} children and the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Mal 4:6).

Beyond the nuclear family, the influence of godly grandparents is invaluable. With age lies wisdom (Job 12:12), which can enrich the entire family. At the same time, grandchildren are considered the “crown of old men” (Prov 17:6).

**b. Role of the Children**

The basic principle children are to observe in relation to their parents is expressed in both testaments: “Honor your father and your mother” (Deut 5:16; Eph 6:2), which is accompanied by a promise of blessing: “…so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth” (Eph 6:3), as well as by a curse to those who fail to do it (Deut 27:16).

Honor for parents primarily consists of obedience (Eph 6:1; Col 3:20). Children are obliged to harness their desire for freedom and independence until they complete their entire course of domestic training (see Lk 15:12ff). The Old Testament presents us with some interesting examples of children’s obedience. God Himself singled out the sons of Jonadab, whose submissive spirits contrasted with the stubborn independence of Israel at that time (Jer 35). God promised them a special blessing for their obedience to their father: “Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not lack a man to stand before Me always” (Jer 35:19).

Respect and obedience to parents requires children to heed their instruction: “A wise son {accepts his} father's discipline, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke” (Prov 13:1). Wise Solomon repeatedly urges children to listen to their parents (Prov 1:8-9; 4:1-4; 6:20-23).

Honoring parents also means doing them no harm. The book of Proverbs forbids one to “curse his father or his mother” (Prov 20:20; 30:11, 17), “rob his father or his mother” (Prov 28:24), or “assault” or “drive (them) away” (Prov 19:26).

Children are to care for their elderly parents. In Solomon’ words, “Do not despise your mother when she is old” (Prov 23:22). Jesus interpreted the commandment, “Honor your father and mother,” in terms of financial support (see Matt 15:3-6). In addition, Jesus provided for his mother as He was dying by entrusting her to His disciple John (Jn 19:26-27). Paul affirms the same principle:

But if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God…. But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim 5:4, 8).

The happiness and well-being of parents depend to a great degree on their children’s behavior. Proverbs repeatedly echoes the refrain, “A wise son makes a father glad, but a foolish son is a grief to his mother” (Prov 10:1; also see Prov 15:20; 17:21, 25; 19:13; 23:15-16, 24-25; 27:11; 29:3). A child’s success has an effect on his or her parents (1 Sam 17:55-58). Not only do parents glory in their children, but also a son glories in his father (Prov 17:6).

**c. Other Factors**

Between family members, a special bond exists that becomes most apparent during times of crisis, as the Scripture says, “A brother is born for adversity” (Prov 17:17). When hard time come, as a rule, the family rises up to lend support to those members in need. Even Joseph’s brothers, who hated their brother, nonetheless were ready to show him some measure of mercy because he was their brother (Gen 37:27). Joseph himself is an excellent example of forgiveness within the family unit. Even after his brothers sold him into slavery, he was ready to forgive them and provide for them (Gen 45).

Support may come even from outside the boundaries of the immediate family. For example, Boaz showed favor to the family of his departed relative Elimelech by marrying his widowed daughter in law, Ruth. In addition, it was proscribed in the Mosaic Law that an individual should redeem the land of a poor relative (Lev 25:25). Moreover, Mordecai took in Esther, his uncle’s daughter, because she was without support (Est 2:7). In the New Testament, Paul was warned by his sister’s son of an ambush planned against him (Acts 23:16-22).

However, the Bible also recorded numerous instances of abuse within the family. Along with the case of Joseph’s brothers, the half-brothers of Jephthah also dealt cruelly with him (Judg 11:1-3). Furthermore, Job’s family abandoned him in his time of need (Job 19:13-19) and Laban took advantage of Jacob’s vulnerable position (Gen 29-31). Even the Savior was initially rejected by his family (Matt 13:53-57; Jn 4:44). Therefore, Micah’s admonition sometimes applies:

Do not trust in a neighbor; do not have confidence in a friend. From her who lies in your bosom guard your lips. For son treats father contemptuously, daughter rises up against her mother, daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man's enemies are the men of his own household (Mic 7:5-6).

No matter how meaningful good family relationships may be, one’s relationship with God always holds priority (Lk 14:26). According to our Lord Jesus, our role as disciples has higher priority than our position in our natural family: “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matt 10:37). There are times when obedience to God results in conflicts in the home. In such instances, one must do that which pleases God. Even the Old Covenant required family members to participate in the execution of someone leading Israel away from Yahweh (Deut 13:6-11). We also recall the time when some Israeli men parted with their Gentiles wives, whom they had been forbidden to marry (Ez 10:3ff).[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. At the same time, we recognize that other factors may effect the promised outcome. We see in Scripture that not all descendants of godly parents followed their example, such as the sons of Samuel (1 Sam 8:3), Hezekiah (2 Kin 21:1-3), and the grandson of Moses (Judg 18:30). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Having said that, we also take into consideration that in the Old Testament the firstborn had rights to a larger share of the family inheritance. Still, there were exceptions when a different son received the inheritance (1 Chr 26:10) or when, in the absence of a son, a daughter was named the heir (Num 27:1-14; Josh 17:3-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. However, this rule does not apply to “mixed” marriages (i.e., believers with unbelievers) today (see 1 Cor 7:12-13). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)