

INSIDE OUT



inside out

*Children and families
trusting, following, and
sharing Jesus.*

Don MacLafferty

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Thank You

To Jesus Christ, my best Friend, my Savior, my Lord. You fill my life with joy every morning. Great is Your faithfulness to me! I write this book in Your honor hoping that You will use it to draw all people to You.

To my wife April. You are my soul mate and faith partner. You are a delight to love. You make our house a home.

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To the many priceless families whose life adventures with Christ I have tried to capture for the printed page. I have changed your names, but God knows you. He knows your faith journey. Your investment in your relationship with Jesus and with your children continues to inspire and bless my life!

A Note from the Author

Time is short. Someday soon Jesus Christ will come to take us home to Heaven. When He comes in the clouds, what we have invested our lives in, our daily priorities, will suddenly appear before us with stark clarity. How will the priorities that we now deem so critical weigh in with eternity? Please don't wait until Jesus comes again to answer that question.

This book is my story, our story, and your story. I'll share my life journey and some simple ways God has led us as a family in our faith. That is my story. You'll also read adventures of children, teens, and adults around the world—stories that may make you whisper to yourself, “That’s our adventure, too!” As you read, my prayer is that God will help you reconnect with your story—the epic God longs to write about you!

Each story is followed by a timely passage from the Bible. Each chapter of this book will provide you with “Mentoring Moments” for you and your family. These Mentoring Moments are opportunities for you to stretch your journey with loving Jesus Christ, the family and friends He has given you. Now, I have a question for you.

Have you ever had the joy of sinking your teeth into a sweet, Georgia peach on a hot summer day? It's not something you rush through like eating a bagel on your way to work. Instead, you savor it as the juice dribbles down your chin

and off your elbows. You find yourself smiling.

I invite you to find a good chair, some shade under a tree, or your corner on the subway... and enjoy the flavor of each story. Reflect on the questions. Open your heart. My prayer is that God will bless you on your journey, your story with Him...and that your story will bless your family, friends, and the next generation.

Inside Out

Dark depths of an empty soul
Searching for meaning
The utter hopelessness of
Discarded visions
Forgotten dreams

God reaches down His hand
Kindles the hot coals
From the glowing embers
Love ignites a flame
A burning candle deep within

The flickering blaze
Can't be hidden
Growing stronger and stronger
It radiates heat and warmth
Flooding the house with light

Passerby
Traveling in the inky blackness
Trying to see in the penetrating dark
Are guided by the lamp
Shining through the window
Showing the way

Imagine
A candle in every corner
Every house
Countless hands
Countless hearts

People from every nation
Every generation
Young and old
Raise their flaming torches to the sky
Set the world on fire
From the
Inside Out

by Julie MacLafferty

Call-Back

Chapter One

Defining moments. Do you have them in your life? Moments that have become critical to new directions and relationships? That cold night in the winter of 1999 became one of my life's defining moments. It was a painfully cold moment, but I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Early in our marriage, April and I lived in Holland, Michigan, where we were part of a church community that we loved. We were eager to succeed in His service, so we asked God to bless our ministry. In spite of our youthful inexperience, He answered our prayers and blessed our church with unexpected growth.

The talented ministry team at the Holland church prayed, worked together, and enjoyed providing innovative ministry for our church family and for those who lived within driving distance. As we prayed, cared, and shared, God brought us more and more people who were hungry for hope. Soon we needed to build a new church.

You might say, "Great story!" Yes, it is a great story of how God blessed a couple and a church family to grow together. But the story doesn't end there. You see, at that time we had two children: Jason (age six) and Julie (age three). As our ministry grew, my time with these two children slowly melted away like butter on a skillet.

I had become seduced with the thought that my greatest service for God was what I did for Him outside my home. I was one hundred percent emotionally engaged with the people in my church and community. When I came home, I had little left emotionally to pour into my family. I gave my family what was left of my time and my heart, and that was not enough.

So it was on that wintry night that our two children, dressed in their pajamas, met me on the way out the door. “Where are you going, Daddy?” they asked. “To church,” I quickly replied as I pulled on my boots and coat. “Daddy, you’re always gone! Stay home tonight and play with us!” they pleaded.

I did a quick check in my mind to gauge how candid our children were being with me. “Well,” I thought to myself, “I’m usually working five or six nights a week.” I had been doing that for a longer than I could remember. This routine had become so commonplace that I’d concluded that it was what I needed to do. It was a requirement in my life as a leader.

“Sorry, kids! I gave the leaders my word that I’d be at the meeting tonight. Maybe we can play tomorrow night.” My kids’ eyes began to fill with tears. They knew that Daddy’s “tomorrows” seldom came.

A quick hug to each one and then I’d be on my way—or so I thought. Their little arms hugged me close, that, when I tried to stand up, they wouldn’t let me go. I was stuck. A glance at the clock on the wall told me that I had five minutes to make it to the meeting. I would NOT be late.

I had to pry their fingers off my neck. “I love you, kids. See you in the morning!” I said as I closed the door. As I left home and headed to the meeting, I couldn’t shake from my mind the sight of my children crying and holding out their arms to me, their busy, busy father.

Their cries of “You never play with us anymore!” echoed in my mind as I crunched my way across the frozen snow to the meeting across the street. As I walked, a cold wind whipped across my face—a cold that matched how I felt inside. God had just confronted me through the voices of my own children. Fortunately, though, He was about to confront me again!

As I walked, a Voice stopped me in my tracks. I knew that Voice. That Voice spoke to me through the Bible, in my prayers, and sometimes in the most inopportune times. The quiet Voice to my heart challenged me with these words, “When I come again, I will not ask you first about the new church you’re building or how many people you’ve visited, helped, or baptized. I’ll ask you first, ‘Where is your wife and where are your children?’” I gasped in the brisk air and waited to hear more. There was nothing, only the howling of the wind.

My pace slowed as I shuffled my feet through the snow. I knew where April would be when Jesus came again. She would be standing there beside me with a grateful heart for all Jesus had done for her. “But what about our children? Where would they be?” I wondered. I realized that I had no clue.

I had not been playing with them. I had no time to reach their hearts for God. With sickening clarity, I realized I was so focused on bringing others in the church and community to come and know God that I'd found no time to bring my own children to Jesus!

Sure, I made it to the meeting on time. Of course, I did. It was an important meeting. But more important than my children? "Ouch. My priorities are way out of place," I thought to myself. As the meeting began, I silently promised God, "Something's about to change!" But where would I begin?

Mentoring Moments

List your top four priorities.

Estimate the number of hours you devote each week to each priority.

What do you do with the rest of your time? Seriously. List the activities.

Pray for God's blessing. Read chapter four, verses 5-6 of the book of Malachi in your Bible. What do you need to do to come close to your children... even your grown-up children?

Now for a tough question: When your life is over, or when Jesus comes again (whichever comes first,) with whom do you want to share eternity? List their names.

Ask God, "What needs to change in my life?" Write down what He impresses upon your heart.

Get into Their World

Chapter Two

Where do you begin when God calls you back to your children? This is what I wondered in 1999. I knew I wanted to be close to our children. I knew I wanted them to feel close to me. I longed for our children to experience Jesus on a very personal level along with all the joy, peace, and purpose He has to offer. I wondered where to start. But what's a good entry point to having this kind of experience with our children, and seeing them walk with God?

Prayer. We all talk about it. Do it! God knows just the way for us to connect with the hearts of each one of our children. He is passionate about calling us back to our children. He is the One who prophesied in the last two verses of the Bible's Old Testament:

“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah... He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers...” Malachi 4:5-6

I was more emotionally connected with my work than with our own son and daughter. I started praying that God would emotionally connect me with our children. I asked God to give me a bigger place in my heart to love them. You can't pray that prayer again and again without God setting you up to start something better with

your kids.

I wanted to learn to listen to our children with my heart, and without looking at my watch. God was moving my soul to want to talk with them day in and day out. I didn't want my children and I to be strangers, living in the same house.

As I passed by Julie's bedroom a few days after the callback from God, Julie called out, "Hi, Daddy!" "Good morning, Julie," I said as I briskly passed by the doorway to her room. My conversations with her were usually short and quick. God wanted me to slow down.

His still, small Voice whispered to my heart, "If you're ever going to reach this girl for Me, you've got to get into her world." "OK," I thought to myself, "how do I get into my daughter's world?" I needed to see what she was interested in. Julie needed me to participate with her in activities that were important to her.

I slowly swung around and retraced my steps back to her room. "What was little Julie interested in?" I thought. I hadn't even noticed what she was playing with as I had passed by her room. So I stood by her open door and watched her in action.

All over the floor my three-year-old daughter had doll clothes, a doll house, doll furniture and...of course, her precious little dolls all dressed up for the day. "Great!" I thought. "Just what I wanted to do this morning. Play with dolls. I know nothing about dolls. As a boy, I

hadn't played with my sister's dolls. Maybe I'll just come back later." But Julie was too quick for me.

"Daddy! Did you come to play with me?" Her green eyes were dancing with delight...and hope. How could I say, "No?" I cautiously edged my way towards my daughter and her dolls, her treasured friends.

I reached down and picked up one of her beautiful dolls –by the head! I didn't know how to pick up the thing. I plucked it off the floor gingerly, as I would if I found a dead rat in our tool shed. Praise the Lord for the mercy and kindness of little children! Instead of lashing out at me for handling her doll with such disrespect, she encouraged my heroic deed. "Good, Daddy! That's my doll. You can hold her."

"What do I do now?" I asked her painfully. "Just tell me stories with her. You know, like you tell stories at church." So I did. And so began an odyssey to get into the world of my daughter. It took several years to win her heart back to me. She had learned too well that her father had no time for her. She had already begun to pull herself away from me emotionally. It takes time for God to turn our hearts back to each other again.

With my son, I had to find different ways to get into his world. At the time, Jason loved taking things apart: our lamp, the front door, the alarm clock. You get the idea. When he was a toddler, we had given him a set of plastic tools, which he had put to good use. But now he was borrowing

my tools to take apart anything and everything.

I'm not too gifted with technology. I am OK with taking things apart, not so good with putting them back together. But this was Jason's world, so to connect with our boy's heart. I chose to join him in the world of tools. Jason was so happy to have me work with him! It gave us time to laugh, talk, and explore together. Spending time with Jason and Julie has paved the way for me to get into the life of our youngest daughter Jessica.

Recently, our eight-year-old Jessica was nearly beside herself with curiosity. I had heard that a local hardware store was selling baby rabbits, chickens, and ducks. Jessica has always loved touching, holding, and talking to every living thing imaginable.

I told her, "Today I am going to take you for a date to the hardware store!" She wrinkled up her forehead, "You are?" she asked doubtfully. "What would we do there? That sounds boring." "We're going to see the BCDs!" I said. That cryptic insight piqued her curiosity. "What are BCDs?" she demanded. "You're about to find out. I guarantee you'll like them," I promised.

Minutes later we pulled up in our car to the hardware store. She slipped her hand into mine. Looking up at me, Jessica said, "Let's hurry up. I want to find the BCDs." She literally pulled me through the store.

Moments later, as she met the bunnies, chicks, and ducks she was ecstatic! She wanted me

to catch every little chick and duckling in the cages so she could love on them. As I handed her bright, fluffy balls of feathers, she laughed, giggled, and carried on great conversations with each one. By the way, we had a great conversation on the way home as well!

Mentoring Moments

Begin to pray for God to open your heart up to your children, grandchildren, or the children that God has trusted to your influence.

List the names of the children God has placed in your life. Beside each name, record some interests.

Now make a simple plan for what activities you are going to do with each child so that you can get into that child's world. Schedule the time with each child. Do it!

Don't be discouraged if it takes some time to connect or reconnect with your children. They're worth it! Be patient with yourself and with them.

Read Chapters 1 & 2 in the Gospel of Luke. Ponder the story of how Jesus came down into our world to reach us. He came to us! He didn't wait for us to come to Him. What other insights does Jesus' example give you for connecting with your children? List your ideas.

God's Dreams for Children

Chapter Three

Have you noticed what is happening to our children? Have you watched their faces and looked into their eyes lately? When you look into their eyes, you'll see some that sparkle with hope, joy, and a sense of belonging. You'll see some whose eyes are lit up with the fire of living purposefully and acting on what God has called them to do. But keep looking.

Look into the eyes of children as you pass them in the halls of schools and churches. Look into the eyes of children on the streets, hanging out in playgrounds, and playing next door to you. Look into the eyes of the children in your own home. What do you see?

Many children today are growing up without someone to hold them, love them, or lead them. Many are raising themselves and being taught values only by TV or friends. They grow up without having someone listen to their questions, love them enough to challenge them, or care enough to lead them to discover Jesus for themselves. Many are sidelined until they're adults, told to wait to speak up, stand up, or live out the dreams God has already given them.

What are God's dreams for children? What

comes to your mind? Jot down the first three things that you think of:

#1 _____

#2 _____

#3 _____

In the fall of 2001, I was hiking along a trail and asking God for His vision for children. For years, my wife and I had become increasingly concerned that many children are walking away from their faith in their teens or twenties...or not even finding it at all! So it was on this autumn day, after several months of focused praying for solutions, that I found myself on the trail pleading with God for His vision.

During my conversation with God, my part went something like this: “I may not be the man to receive Your vision for how to reach this generation. I may not have the wisdom, experience, or character to hear and act on whatever You’re dreaming up for Your children. But, Lord, I’m willing. I’m willing to do whatever you ask me to do to help the children. Just tell me!”

Before long, God responded, but I was not prepared for what He had to say. I was expecting some grandiose idea. His voice whispered to my heart something painfully simple: “Don, you’re not discipling the children.” The simplicity of His answer embarrassed me. “What do you mean?” I argued. “We do all kinds of things for children. We clothe them, feed them, teach them,

coach them, and preach to them. I know a bunch of church kids go to all kinds of programs that teach lots of good things about You!” But then a thought hit me like a bullet: “It’s very possible to be doing all these wonderful things for children, and yet have them grow up without being intentionally mentored to Christ.” “Wow!” I thought. “We may be making lots of investments in children, but bypassing what would lead each child to personally experience Jesus.”

Walking further along the trail, I felt like I was in a daze. God wasn’t through sharing, though. His voice said, “One more thing. You’re divorcing parents from personally discipling their children to Christ.” That puzzled me, so I paused to think about that. As I pondered, I had to be honest and admit that much of what I was doing for children was without their parents’ involvement. In fact, I realized that my efforts were making it easy for parents to be completely disconnected spiritually from their children. They could drop off their children at the school, church, or community program...and run. Was this God’s way?

Over the days ahead, I rediscovered three powerful passages in the Bible that reveal God’s dreams for His children. Please look these texts up in your own Bible and underline them. Pray about them. Think about them. Live them!

1st Passage: Acts 2:17

“In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions,

your old men will dream dreams.”

What does God dream?

To have everyone, including children,
full of His Holy Spirit

For every child to prophecy, or tell the
world, about Jesus Christ

For the young and old to have visions
and dreams together...and live God's
dreams together!

2nd Passage: Malachi 4:5-6

“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before
that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.
He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their
children, and the hearts of the children to their
fathers.”

What does God dream?

To draw the hearts of fathers (and
mothers) back to their own children

To draw the hearts of children back to
their own parents

3rd Passage: Deuteronomy 6:4-7

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is
one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your strength.
These commandments that I give you today are

to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

What does God dream?

For parents to love God completely

For parents to obey God out of their heart relationship with Christ

For parents to be the disciple-makers of their children

This is what God placed on my heart. He impressed me to launch and lead a movement to equip parents and other mentors to disciple their children to Jesus Christ. I felt impressed to act on His dreams immediately. I had no idea of what that would cost.

To be free to champion a vision God prescribes, you must be willing to be shaken up, humbled, and moved...in my case, literally. For my homework, I came home from my hike and shared with my wife all that God had placed on my heart. She prayed with me many times. God united our hearts to pursue what God had revealed.

To help me remember this experience, I wrote out a simple outline of what God had impressed on my heart concerning how to disciple children. A few days later, our family attended a ministry convention. I found about twenty godly leaders to listen to what God had placed on my heart.

I shared the vision with each leader and asked them to give me constructive criticism. Without fail, each one arrived at the same conclusion: “This is from the Lord. You must do this!”

When I returned home from talking with those leaders, I knew my children needed to become a part of what God was about to do for us as a family. With this in mind, I invited our children to hop on my back for a piggyback ride in our yard. “See the stars. Someday soon we’ll go home to heaven way up there. Years ago, God called Abraham to leave his home and go wherever God led him. God has called me and your mother to leave here and start up a ministry to disciple children to Jesus. I know Jesus will take care of us just as He did for Abraham.”

“Where will we go, Daddy?” Jason and Julie asked me while we all stared up at the stars. “I don’t know. But will you come with me?” I asked. “Yes, Daddy! We’ll come with you!”

So within four months from receiving this vision from God, I had resigned from my work as a Youth Director, assisted my employer in finding someone to replace me, and sold our home. We didn’t have a place to go. I didn’t have a job to pay the bills. What I did have, though, was a vision from God...and a family willing to go with me!

Mentoring Moments

Read and reread those three Bible passages mentioned above. Pray that God will open your heart to be shaken, led, and moved.

You will never lead a child on a journey with Christ that you're not taking yourself. Come as you are to Jesus Christ. He loves you more than you can imagine! List one step that would strengthen your relationship with Him. Do it!

God loves the children in your life: your sons and daughters, your younger siblings, the kids down your street and in your church. Schedule some time each week with your children. Have fun with them...and pass on your faith in simple, quick ways. Don't preach. Just share what God is doing in your life. Ask your children how you can pray for them.

The Bright Red Tie

Chapter Four

Tick. Tick. Tick. I watched the clock in our aunt's cabin nestled in the Smoky Mountains. Our family was enjoying several weeks of vacation we had stored up before I resigned from my position as a Youth Director. What our kids didn't know was that in a few days our paid vacation would be over, our paycheck would stop, and we still didn't know where God would send us to launch a ministry to disciple children.

The clock relentlessly ticked on. Time was running out. During the day, we hiked with our children, played games, enjoyed family worship, and created fun meals together. At night, when our children were asleep, April and I stayed up to pray, worry...and hope for God to make something work for our family. I wish I could say that I had complete peace in the Providence of God to take care of us, but I didn't. In spite of my doubts, though, God's grace still covers us.

Wouldn't you know it? On the last day of our paycheck, I received a phone call. We were invited to come and launch this new ministry for children and families in the church where we were married in Collegedale, Tennessee. One problem concerned me: The church and its sponsoring conference offered a salary of about half of my previous one.

Ha! As humans we get so concerned with counting of money. God is never intimidated with the amount of money needed for what He has called us to do! Within weeks, four financial partnerships had been formed to pilot this new ministry and provide for our family. Praise God!

Over the past eight years, God has been faithful to provide for us and the growing needs of Kids In Discipleship, the ministry we launched to see every child a disciple of Jesus Christ. He has provided volunteers, mission-minded staff, and people inspired to give so that children may learn to trust, follow, and share Jesus!

Often God's answer to our challenges has come from the least expected sources. God loves to take care of us in ways that will focus our eyes only on Him. Sometimes I think He has a lot of fun in orchestrating His Providence!

One morning several years ago, I awoke with a strong impression to wear a jacket and tie on my flight home from San Diego. I usually dress casually for my flights. On this particular morning I was impressed to wear my bright green jacket and my bright red tie with children of the world marching across it! I felt like God was impressing me that I would meet someone on the flights for His purposes.

I raised my eyebrows as I quickly tied a knot in my "kid-friendly" tie. "What was God up to today?" I wondered. I flew from San Diego to Dallas. I looked at the strangers seated to my right and to my left. Was the person I was to meet on this flight? We circled around and

around over Dallas. I looked at my watch. I had a tight connection for my flight to Chattanooga. “It’s going to be wild trying to get there on time!” I thought to myself. As we landed much later, I mused, “I’m going to have to run to have any chance to catch this flight!”

I hurried off the plane and hit the ground running, laptop in one hand, duffle bag in the other. I ran for what seemed a few miles and finally found my gate. “Can I still get on?” I asked. There was no plane in sight. In my mind, I prayed, “God, please get me on that plane and home to my family!” “OK!” said an attendant. “We’ll get you on that plane. Ready for a ride?” Another attendant took me for a quick ride on a golf cart out to the plane on the tarmac.

As I ran up the steps and onto the plane, I was greeted by several pairs of eyes glaring at the stranger who had held up their flight. “I love your tie!” gushed the woman on the seat behind where I would be sitting. “Does it mean anything?” she asked.

I looked down at my bright red tie with red, brown, yellow, black, and white children marching across it. “Yes! It means that I love working with children. I direct a ministry that helps parents mentor their children.” As the plane taxied down the runway, I wondered, “Lord, is this the person You planned for me to meet?” But she buried her face in a book for the rest of the flight.

Fifteen minutes before our flight landed in Chattanooga, the man across the aisle turned to

me and said, “I heard you tell that lady when you came late onto the plane that you direct a ministry for mentoring children. Would you please tell me about that?”

As the plane began its final approach, I shared God’s call on my heart to equip parents and all other potential mentors to disciple children to Jesus Christ. I told him that God was calling me to risk my comfort and security to share God’s dreams for children around the world.

He listened with rapt attention and asked deep questions. By this time, our plane had landed. “Thanks for what you’re doing for children,” he said. We shook hands, and then he hurried off the plane. I gathered my luggage and walked into the terminal. There, leaning over the counter was the man I had just talked with on the plane. He was busy writing something.

“Here. I hope this helps,” he said as he casually folded a small piece of paper and handed it to me. I thanked him and he walked away.

My wife and children were watching for me on the other side of the security checkpoint. They began to wave. I jogged to them and pulled them close to me. After lots of hugs, I whispered, “I think God just did something special to show us how big He is! Let’s look at something a man on the plane just gave me.” I took the folded piece of paper and held it up. “I don’t know what is on this, but let’s look at what the man handed me.” My family gathered around me.

I unfolded the paper. It was a check for \$3,000!

I looked for the man and he was long gone. At the bottom of the check, he had written “For the Cause of Christ”. We gaped at the check. “Wow! God really is big!” we exclaimed.

With passengers hurrying past our little family circle, we bowed our heads and thanked our great God for providing everything we needed to do what He was asking us to do! We never heard from or have seen that man again. I wear that bright red tie with the children marching across it often. It makes me remember that God loves to set up Divine Appointments and to provide for us in the least likely ways.

Mentoring Moments

Read the fourth chapter of the book of Joshua in the Bible. Gather your family around you and invite them to read this story with you. Discuss why God wanted His people to gather the stones. What was the purpose of the stones?

Give your family three minutes to hunt through your home for anything that reminds them of a time that God was faithful to your family. Find pictures, small objects kept from important moments, etc. Let each member of the family share an object and a story of God’s faithfulness.

How has God been providing for your family lately? What is God telling your family through the many ways He has cared for you in the past?

God is calling you and your family to focus much, much more on His care for you, and much, much less on what you are worrying about at this time. Read and claim this verse in the Bible: Philippians, the fourth chapter, verse nineteen.

He Lost His Hand, But Found God's Heart

Chapter Five

Muddy shoes. Jeans and t-shirt sprinkled with sawdust. Carpenter's pencil tucked behind his ear. This is Mike. Can you picture him? Mike is a general contractor. He loves building beautiful homes, some of which I've walked through. His homes are masterpieces of creative workmanship. He is GOOD at what he does. This is his story...and God's story.

Mike has always worked hard. When I first met him, he was working six days a week from eight in the morning until one or two in the morning. He can do most anything when building a home, but the finishing work is where he has his fun. Just look at the mantelpiece above the fireplace in the home five miles from where I live, and you will see what I mean. It's a work of art.

Throughout most of his working life, his family hasn't seen him much. It's tough to make ends meet. He has a growing family. He and his wife want their children to have quality education. Like most Americans, he has more debt than he would like, so working long hours is a way of life.

A few years ago, as Mike was driving his family to church, he and his wife desperately tried to

help their son master a long memory verse from the Bible. During the preceding week, Mike hadn't found much time to help Josh learn the verse. If truth be known, Mike really hadn't seen Josh or any of his kids much during that week or most other weeks.

Time and again, Mike tried to get Josh to repeat the Bible text. But every time Josh messed up. Eventually, Josh grew tired of the effort and was ready to give up. "I just can't get it!" he cried. At this point, Mike shared his son's frustration.

As they drove into the church parking lot, Mike wondered to himself, "What's wrong with this picture? I want our kids to grow in their faith, but this is no fun." Throughout the worship service and for most of the afternoon, Mike felt extremely uncomfortable. His kids needed something more, but what was it?

During the rest of the weekend, Mike replayed the scene of trying to cram a memory verse into Josh's brain. He found himself so upset that he couldn't sleep. He was bothered by his own lack of involvement in his son's life.

On the following Monday evening, Mike took the time off to join his boys at a youth meeting. He had to be with his sons. When Mike tells the story, he always mentions this point: "At the front of the room, I saw this strange, tall guy with glasses talking with the kids. He asked if any of the kids wanted to learn how to be a disciple of Jesus." That strange looking, tall guy was me.

Mike's son, Patrick signed up for a Kids In Discipleship small group. After getting an invitation in the mail to attend a parent orientation, Mike swiftly delegated the meeting to his wife Victoria. Mike's work as a contractor has gifted him with delegating. He knew he was just too busy to go. But Victoria knew what was best for their family.

Later that evening—after a few pensive hours-- Victoria shared her thoughts with Mike, “I feel that this is something our family needs to do.” Victoria knew that she and Mike were hungry for change and wanted to have a home filled with children who were happily following Jesus. As is so often the case, what Momma wants, Momma gets. Not surprisingly, then, a week later, Mike joined Victoria in a class designed to equip parents to mentor their children to Jesus.

As a man of action, when Mike was reminded about having family worship, he started it immediately. Often Mike had to leave work, go home for family worship, and then return to work late into the night. Sometimes the demands of his schedule meant having worship at ten or eleven at night when he came home “early” from the job site. Worship wasn't always enjoyable at that hour of the night with young children, but it was a start.

Mike wasn't always sure if his children liked to come to worship. Sometimes he questioned whether it was worth the extra effort. He found his answer on a memorable evening, when, while unloading his tools after arriving home

late again, Mike wondered if he should just skip leading worship.

His son, Patrick, thought that his dad had forgotten. He cornered Mike with this question, “Dad, what did you forget?” Being a forgetful man, Mike responded, “I don’t know. What did I forget?” Patrick said, “Dad, we haven’t had worship yet!”

That little comment from Patrick was enough to convince Mike that his extra time in investing in his kids was starting to make a difference. His heart was moved that now his eldest son was asking him for worship time with God! Over the years, worshipping Jesus in the home has become a regular part of each day for Mike’s family.

While family worship has been a win for Mike’s home, his struggle with managing his work hours continued. As it is for many of us, Mike realized that when work hours are too high, it’s often difficult to have time or energy to invest in family or in a daily friendship with God. But one major life crisis was about to put everything into perspective for Mike.

In March of 2009, Victoria raced her husband to an emergency room in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Earlier that evening, Mike had suddenly felt very weak as he had cleaned his home office. His right side felt numb and weak. Victoria didn’t know what was happening for sure, but she knew he was in deep trouble.

In the emergency room, Mike seemed to

be stabilized, then, in a flash of a moment everything changed. He fell out of bed. He had just had a massive stroke at the age of 39. He was unable to move or speak. Later, Mike told me, “If I had arrived at the ER just a few minutes later, I would’ve been dead.”

While Mike lay on the hospital bed, his mind sped through the years of his life. As he thought about his children, with horror he realized that he still hadn’t valued them nearly as high as God expected. He pleaded with God for another chance to mentor his children. In his mind, he said, “Lord, I haven’t had enough time with my kids.”

Praise the Lord that today Mike walks, talks, and interacts well. Yet he has not regained the full use of his right hand. At this time, he can’t create the beautiful woodworking details that once were his trademark. Handling the tools that he loves is difficult, often very awkward and frustrating. Strangely enough, though, Mike thanks God for his stroke.

It took losing much of the use of his right hand for Mike to reconsider what matters most. Mike is re-investing in his daily time with God, his marriage, and his children. He sees his life as a daily gift from God, and wants every day to count for God, his family, and his witness!

Just a few months ago, Mike completed building a home for George, a man who is an amputee. Mike had been pleading with God, “Lord, show me what I can do for you. I can’t use my hand as well as I used to, but I still know how to

build houses.”

Mike had originally visited George’s home to build a wheelchair ramp. It was intended as a goodwill gesture to make life more enjoyable and less challenging friend. As he completed the work, though, Mike noticed that George’s home needed further attention, so he called me: “Don, this man needs more than a wheelchair ramp. He needs a whole new house!”

After weeks of praying, Mike called to share an idea: “Don, I want our community to build George a home for free. I want to get all the materials donated as well as all the labor.” Two and a half months later—after children, parents and a host of community people had worked very hard—George moved into a beautiful, cozy home...for free!

Mentoring Moments

If you had a massive stroke tonight,
what would you have wished you had
done:

In your relationship with Jesus Christ?

For your marriage?

For your children?

For your witness?

What prevents you from making the investments you need to make in the four areas mentioned above?

What is your main excuse for not investing more in the relationships that matter most?

Submit your excuses to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus has grace, forgiveness, and help available for you! Read the following Bible promises: I John 1:9, Philippians 4:13, 19.

3000 Sandwiches...and Counting!

Chapter Six

Cool. Calm. Sure. Allen drives fast cars, connects with people comfortably, and has a gift for converting dreams to financial successes. His business world keeps his pace at a high tempo. Talk to him for a few minutes and his cell phone will be ringing twice. He loves challenges, hates boredom, and, until recently, felt quite comfortable with church life and God staying in a neat, tidy box.

Allen first asked about joining a Footprints for Kids small group because “I want my son Eric to have something more with God than I got growing up in my church.” He didn’t join because of any desire for a major change in his own life; he just wanted his son to have a real faith.

This busy dad came faithfully with Eric to join the other parents each week in exploring God’s Word with their children. As each week flew by, Allen often said, “This is good for Eric. He needs this!” What a surprise God had in store for Allen.

As Eric learned how to spend time alone with God every day, Allen encouraged him along. “This is good for you,” he said. One morning,

when Allen was up early reading and praying, Eric bounded into the living room, saw his dad, and skidded to a halt. “What are YOU DOING?” Eric asked. He was not used to seeing his dad do this. “I’m having my T.A.G (time alone with God) time.” he answered. Eric raised his eyebrows and then darted out of the room.

In a few moments, Eric was back, Bible in hand. Eric pulled up a chair close beside his father, and began reading the Bible for himself. When Allen returned to Footprints the next week, he looked very happy. You would have thought he had just made a million dollars that morning. “Guess what happened to me this past week?” he asked.

With enthusiasm, Allen shared how thankful he was that Eric had “caught” him having time alone with God. It was fun to see this usually calm father so animated was about having time with God! As he grew in his friendship with God, his son did as well. You just never know who is watching you in your own home!

As Allen mentored Eric each week over the school year, God moved his heart. Allen encouraged Eric to spend daily time with Jesus, so he began investing in his time alone with God. Allen helped his son to know the Biblical teachings of faith and found himself saying, “This stuff in the Bible is easy to understand. This is good for my faith, too!” Allen encouraged Eric to share his faith, but wondered how he would ever share his.

When the Footprints meetings ended for the year, Allen wondered what God wanted him

to do next. He loves people, knows how to organize, enjoys serving, and cares about the homeless. He wanted to share his faith in Christ in a tangible way that would involve his family as well.

Allen thought, prayed, and puzzled about what his family could do that would make any difference for Christ in their community. I remember getting a text message from Allen in the middle of the week: “Come and feed the homeless this Saturday 3pm. Help make 200 sandwiches.”

The next Saturday, my family and I piled into our car and drove over to where we were to meet Allen. I saw lots of cars in the parking lot. Inside I saw several long tables were set end to end. Lining both sides of the tables were children who were laughing, joking, and barking orders: “Need another loaf of bread!” hollered one kid. “Out of cheese over here!” yelled another. “Got the cookies all ready down here!” said a teenager.

All the while, Allen was beaming from ear to ear. From chaos, he formed assembly lines. He established supply lines so that each kid would have everything needed to create a fully loaded sandwich. In fifteen minutes, 200 sandwiches were made and packed in bags along with fruit, chips, and a cookie.

We followed Allen’s van down to the center of the city. A line of cars followed like army ants. When we reached our destination, we saw hungry men and women lounging along the

streets. Garbage littered the curb. Police cars cruised by, but noticeably did not stop or take time to ask any questions. We jumped out of our cars, opened up the boxes, and passed out the sack lunches. Dozens of people living on the street reached out eagerly for the meals like sea gulls diving for bread crumbs. In minutes, the food was gone.

Since that day, Allen has repeated this scenario once a month, every month of the year. His wife and children are right beside him. It's become a family thing.

During the first few months, Allen asked me to be the one who prayed with the people on the street. "I'll organize it, pay for it, and make it all happen. You pray," he told me. But God created a hunger in him to do something more.

One Saturday after we had finished distributing the lunches and had just packed up our families into our cars for the trip homeward, Allen hurried over to me. "Come with me down this side street," he said. "I saw a lot of people down there." As we walked down the street, sure enough, there were a dozen or so people looking miserable and sitting under the hot sun.

Allen passed out water bottles. I figured he wanted me there to pray with each one. "Here Don. Pray with these folks." Pointing to several desperate looking people down the street he added, "I'll go and pray with them."

A few minutes later, I rejoined Allen as he tenderly talked to an elderly lady whose

wrinkled faced showed evidence of many challenging years on the streets. “Can I pray with you?” he asked her. I listened as Allen prayed with her, and then cared for people whom months before he might have passed by.

“Thank you, Lord, that Allen thought Eric needed mentoring.” I smiled as I silently prayed, “Lord, you’ve got them both now.” I jumped back into my car and drove homeward a thankful man.

Mentoring Moments

What do you want your kids to experience with God? Do you want them to have your faith experience or something more?

What do your kids need to “catch you doing” so they can be inspired in their faith journey?

Pray for God to prepare your heart for what you will read. Turn to the second chapter, verses 14-20 in the book of James in the Bible. What are you doing to intentionally grow in your faith journey with Christ? How is your life actively impacting your world for Him?

What skills has God given you that could be used to serve your community?
What skills has God given your family?

What issues in your neighborhood, community, and city concern you and your family?

Start praying alone and with your family about how you can serve others and share your faith in Jesus Christ. Take a bold step and try something for God's glory. Keep experimenting as a family until you find something your whole family enjoys doing for others.

She Shouldn't Live Here!

Chapter Seven

Frank always got his two boys to Footprints on time. It was a remarkable feat when you consider that Frank worked full time at his job and full time as a single parent. When he wasn't at work, he was buying groceries, making meals, washing clothes, and cleaning the rubble from the "war-zone" of the place called home.

One day I drove to Frank's city and met with his group. I led the families in a lesson that presents God's plan for marriage. He and the boys, along with the other families looked up the Bible texts, enjoyed a lively discussion, and, at the end of the discussion, formed family circles with their chairs. During this time—called "My World"—a parent shares how he lives out the Bible teaching just presented. He may share a story or an illustration from his own experience of how the faith teaching works in real life. Kids ask their parents questions, explore how to apply the teaching in their world, and are given an opportunity to make their own decisions about how to live the truth. It seemed to me that everything was going just fine, but I was mistaken. A storm was brewing.

We ended the group with a prayer of blessing for each home represented. The families told me their goodbyes. Frank sent his kids out of the room. He looked distraught. "I need to talk to

you for a few minutes NOW,” he insisted.

“What had I said that has this dad so upset?” I wondered to myself. Then Frank explained the situation. “It started out as a nice Bible study today with the kids, but I have a problem. When I read for myself what God’s Word says about His plan for marriage, I got very uncomfortable. God’s Word showed me today that God wants one man and one woman in a marriage commitment. I know He expects a couple to be married and have His blessing on their united lives before they live together.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “You read God’s Word right. So what’s the problem?” “You’ve placed me as a father in a very difficult situation by training me to be the spiritual mentor of my own boys. Here I am in the ‘My World’ section of the lesson looking into the eyes of my boys and telling them to live lives of sexual purity and to plan on following God’s plan for marriage when they grow up. How can I tell them these things when my boys know I often have a woman living in our home? They know she shouldn’t live there? She’s not my wife.”

Frank’s face was full of agony. “What do I do?” he asked me. His troubled spirit was so obvious that I felt comfortable returning the question to him: “What is the Spirit of God asking you to do through God’s written Word?” Frank’s response revealed a further conflict: “To send her away. But how can I ever do that? She doesn’t want to marry me, but I love her, and I don’t want to risk losing her.”

We prayed together. I asked God to give him the strength to live his life by God's plan. Frank made me no promises. I asked for none. I just assured him that I would pray for him in this difficult decision. He walked away, head down, as though he had just lost his job.

Months passed by. Each time I stopped by Frank's city and visited his group, he smiled and hurriedly moved past me. I prayed continually for God to empower this good man to make the decision that would honor the Lord Jesus.

The Footprints group came to a close at the end of the year. During that final meeting, Frank approached me with great excitement, "My boys both want to be baptized! Would you make the trip our home and talk to my kids about being baptized?" I assured him, "I would be happy to come see you and your boys!" We set a time for when I could travel his way again. I was hoping he would tell me that he had also made an important decision for Christ, but that subject didn't come up.

A few weeks later, I drove up to Frank's home. Before I stepped out of the car, I prayed, "Lord, thank you for calling Frank's boys to choose Jesus as their Savior. Please call Frank to choose to be faithful to you as well."

That evening we gathered together in the living room. I asked the boys to tell me about their faith in Jesus Christ and why they wanted to be baptized. With boyish enthusiasm, they shared that they were ready for the world to know they had chosen Christ. "We want to walk across the

line for Jesus. We want our friends to know by our baptism that, with Jesus' help, we will live our whole lives for Him." Frank smiled at the boys, and looked down at his shoelaces.

We discussed the boys' salvation by the grace of Jesus Christ. They had peace in their hearts on that matter. We reviewed the boys' faith foundation in God's Word. They were sure of what they believed. Frank said, "I've seen a change in my boys. Jesus is making a difference." We knelt down together and prayed a blessing on both boys' decisions for Christ.

I walked away from Frank's home that night very happy, but also very sad. I wondered how Frank could watch his boys choose to be faithful, and not make a decision himself. "God," I pleaded, "overwhelm Frank with your love. Call him to you." I knew that it would be a tough faith challenge for the boys to grow up in a home where their own dad was living a life opposite of what he was teaching them to do. I walked down the driveway to my car and reached for the door handle. I vaguely heard behind me the screen door on Frank's house squeak open and slam shut.

"Stop, Don! Stop!" Frank shouted as he hurriedly walked down to my car. "I can't take it any longer! I can't watch my boys choose to be faithful to Christ and not choose Him myself. I can't bear the thought of my boys going to heaven without me. I've made a decision. My girlfriend has got to go!"

A few weeks later, Frank's sons were baptized.

I was there. I saw Frank's face. There was a joy I had never seen before on his face and a peace that the world can never give. "She's gone," he whispered to me as I hugged his boys. "And with God's help, I'm going to be just fine." He walked away with his arms around his boys. I knew that God was smiling.

Mentoring Moments

Pray for God to prepare your heart to hear His words. Read the sixteenth chapter, verses 24-26 of the Gospel of Matthew in the Bible. Explain the meaning of this text to some children you know. Share what it means to your life NOW.

If I asked the kids in your life what you value most, what would they say?

Identify what areas of your life may be confusing to children who know you. Is there a gap between what you teach your kids and what your kids see you living?

Jesus loves and accepts you just the way you are, but He loves you enough to not leave you that way! He wants you to have the joy of living a life in full alignment with Him. That's the way to peace every day of every year. I invite you to take a few moments in quiet between you and God. Ask Him, "What needs to go in my life?" Ask Him to give you strength and courage to live for Him. He will always respond to that request with a resounding "YES!"

A Walk Across the Room

Chapter Eight

It's hard to be the only one. It's hard to raise your hand when no one else seems to have a question. It's hard to walk across the room to care for someone when no one else is moving. It's tough when you know God is talking directly to you, when life seems the same to everyone around you, and you can't shake the fact that God got to you.

When the Footprints leader asked the question, "Who is God calling you to share Jesus with this week?" no one said a word. Everyone looked at everybody else, except at the small group leader. Finally, at the back of the room, Shana shyly raised her hand. I looked across the group to where she was sitting next to her mother. They sat alone.

"I want to share Jesus with my daddy!" Shana blurted out. "My daddy hates our church! He doesn't love Jesus or even want to talk about Him. When Jesus comes again, I want my daddy to go to Heaven with me!" Shana's words whistled through the air and slammed into our hearts. The group was quiet. Some mothers sitting alone with their children wiped their eyes. I wondered if they were crying out to God to bring their husbands to Jesus.

The leader asked the group, "Who will pray for

Shana? Who will pray that God will help her share Jesus with her daddy?" No one moved a muscle. No one offered to pray for this shy girl. Then, across the group, José raised his hand, "I'll pray for Shana!" And he did. "Dear God, Shana wants her daddy with her in Heaven someday soon. Her daddy doesn't love Jesus. Please help Shana know what to do to tell her daddy about You!"

"Who else believes God is calling you to share Jesus with someone?" The leader asked again. José raised his hand again. I noticed he also was sitting alone with his mother. "I want to share Jesus with my dad, too!" he said with conviction. "He doesn't care much for God or for church stuff, either. I don't know what to say to him, but I know I want him to have Jesus in his heart."

"Who will pray for José?" the leader asked the group. You'd think that everyone would have been raising their hands to pray for him, but there were many guests that night from many different churches. They had come to see what God was doing in the lives of these children and families. The adults in the group were a shy bunch, and again, no one seemed to want to do anything.

Out of the corner of the room I noticed a tall, lanky teen casually sprawled across a chair outside the group's circle. His name was Nigel. He had looked bored and disinterested all during the group's meeting. His eyes were scanning the whole group, back and forth, back and forth. He seemed to be desperately hoping that somebody,

anybody would rescue the moment, but no one moved.

Nigel unfolded himself from his chair and slowly stood up. He looked toward José as if measuring off the distance. He looked with irritation at the crowd and casually sauntered over to where José was staring at him. “If no one else will pray, I’ll pray for you to reach your dad. You know that when you were praying for Shana to share Jesus with her daddy, that’s my dad, too!”

Nigel bowed his head. Passionately he prayed, “God, José doesn’t know what to say to his dad. He doesn’t know how to say it or when to say it. God, give José the right words and the right time. Help him reach his dad with Jesus!” Nigel melted back off the scene as quickly as he could, retreating to his chair outside the circle. I learned later that he was not too interested in the church. I hoped that God would surprise him with His Presence!

I live far away from Nigel’s city on America’s West Coast, but I was able to visit again over a year later. I had often wondered especially about what had happened with Shana. Had she ever risked her father’s anger to tell him about Jesus? I had to know.

Shana had returned home that night from the small group with a determination to reach her unchurched daddy for Jesus. She prayed and prayed to figure out what to do. Some weeks before she and her mother had begun attending Footprints for Kids, her mother had joined a group just for parents and mentors. She had

learned about worshipping Jesus in the home and had already started setting aside time each day with Shana to worship God. Shana thought this might be the perfect idea for her daddy.

“Daddy, mommy and I read stories in the Bible about Jesus and to pray together every day. We’d love it if you’d join us.” “Naw!” her daddy snorted. “I’m never going to come to that!” He walked off angrily.

Shana asked her dad again the next day. Similar response. She asked again and again. She always got the same answer. Shana kept asking God to help her share Jesus with her daddy. She told her Father in Heaven that she wanted her daddy on earth to be with her forever.

One day, after Shana had asked what seemed like millions of times, her daddy simply said, “Sure, I’ll come to your worship, but I’m just coming to watch. Don’t think you’re getting me to pray or read the Bible,” he warned her.

He came the next day, the next, and the next. He found himself actually enjoying the stories about One who loved him, died for him, and was building a place in heaven just for him. He opened his heart to know Jesus Christ, the One who loves him most!

It’s hard to walk across the room when you’re the only one. It’s hard to pray in front of others when everyone else acts like it is a weird thing to do. And it’s hard to talk with your daddy about Jesus when you know he hates Jesus, but people are worth the effort and the risk. When Jesus tugs on

our hearts to do the hard thing, we do it because we love Him and we want our family and friends with us forever!

Mentoring Moments

Are you comfortable praying for other people—when you are with them? When you hear people share their hurts and challenges, practice offering to pray for them right at that moment. Moments come and go too fast. You'll never have that moment again.

What about the kids in your life? Are you comfortable praying aloud for others? Invite the child to join you in practicing praying aloud for others. Invite the child to try praying with and for someone else. Later, ask how it went.

Is there someone in your life that you are hoping will be with you in Heaven, but who seems completely disinterested in Jesus? Love him enough never to give up. Ask God to give you His perfect ways to love him and to encourage him to know Jesus for himself.

Read the eighth chapter, verses 26-40 of the book of Acts in the Bible. God sent an angel to send Philip to share Jesus in a very unlikely place—a desert. List places you go every week that may seem out-of-bounds for sharing Jesus. Are you willing for God to send you to share Jesus in those places?

Basketballs

Chapter Nine

Shondra looked up and down the street. “Who didn’t have Jesus in their hearts on my street?” She wrinkled up her forehead and wondered out loud, “Probably everyone on my street already knows Jesus.” With her Bible under her arm, she leaned against her front door and prayed, “God, help me find someone I can lead to You.”

She heard yelling and thump, thump, thump up the street. Craning her neck around the bushes in her front yard, she could see several boys playing a wild game of basketball. Potential? She wasn’t sure, but there was no one else on the street.

Just a few nights earlier at a Footprints meeting, we had discussed a simple way to invite someone to find salvation in Christ. As the meeting drew to a close, I challenged her, her friends, and their parents to search for someone whom they might help find salvation in Christ. In particular, I challenged them to try it with someone that might not know Him. Shondra was a shy twelve-year-old, but she was willing.

As she approached the boys, who were clearly much older teenagers, she thought to herself, “They look so BIG!” The boys were having a heated game. They were yelling at each other, passing fast, and sinking the shots. She stood

a few feet away and she realized that the boys weren't even seeing her. Total concentration. Total competition. They didn't want distractions. She knew what God wanted her to do. Her mouth went dry.

“Guys!” Her voice cracked. They ignored her. Swish, another two points. “Hey, guys! Can you stop a minute?” They looked at her like she had just landed from Mars. “Do you have time for a short Bible study?” she asked. They looked at each other and back at her. She smiled and didn't flinch. Seeing her with new respect, they all shrugged their shoulders. One of the boys said, “Sure. Go for it.”

To her surprise, she had a lineup of teen boys sitting on the curb curiously listening to hear what she had to say. She prayed for God's blessing and then ploughed right in to the Bible study. She read them texts about God's love for them. She showed them from Scripture that all are sinners and that all need Jesus to save them. She shared God's plan for salvation. Remarkably, the boys listened quietly.

“So, that's it,” she offered as summary. “So do you want to choose Jesus to be your Savior?” The boys were restless. She waited. “Do you?” she repeated. “Naw. We just want to play basketball!” They grabbed their basketball and within seconds were pounding the pavement all over again.

The next week at our Footprints meeting, I asked everyone, “So—who remembered the challenge?” No one spoke. “Did anyone try to

invite someone to choose Jesus as their Savior?” Most of the fathers seemed to be busy looking at their shoelaces or fumbling with their wallets. The mothers seemed to need something right at that moment in their purses. You get the idea. This was an uncomfortable challenge! The kids seemed uncomfortable as well. Only one hand went up. It was Shondra’s.

“How did it go?” I asked her enthusiastically. As she shared her story with the group, she seemed excited. But when she reached here conclusion, her shoulders slumped. She looked down glumly. “No one wanted to have Jesus in their heart.” She choked out the words. “So, I’m a failure, right?” she asked, her eyes burning into mine. She had EVERYONE’S attention. And I was praying, “Help, Lord! What do I say?”

“Shondra, you are NOT a failure! You did what Jesus tells each one of us to do. He says, ‘Go!’ And you went. Jesus tells you to share Him with others, and you did. Jesus doesn’t expect you to guarantee success when you share Him. He gives everybody free choice. Sometimes people will refuse to listen to you. At least that didn’t happen this time.” The look on her face told me that she was still doubtful.

I pressed on. “When I was your age, I never asked anybody to choose Jesus. I never explained the Bible to someone who did not know Him. God sent you, Shondra. If I had asked those boys to stop the game and share a Bible study with me, they wouldn’t have listened. God used you to bless those boys with

hearing about Jesus! You're NOT a failure."

When we concluded the group that night, I watched Shondra and her parents leave the room. She looked so sad. I was troubled. Later, after I had arrived home and told Shondra's experiences to my wife, she echoed my opinion: "She had a lot of courage to share Jesus with those boys!" Still, my concern for Shondra continued. "Because of this discouragement, I'm afraid Shondra will never try talking to someone else about Jesus. She needs another chance right away," I said.

As I prayed, God impressed me to have Shondra meet me at the day camp our church ran for kids during the summer. About a hundred kids would be at the camp. I encouraged Shondra to be prepared to share why she trusted Jesus with her life. The next day, she shyly came to meet me in front of the gym. Because it was raining hard, the kids were playing inside.

We dashed inside the gym, too. Guess what the kids were playing? Basketball! Imagine over a hundred kids playing basketball on a rainy day. They were yelling, screaming, and having a wonderful, chaotic time. I approached the camp leader to ask, "Do you have a few kids here that might be interested in having a Bible study with me and Shondra?" I was thinking we might quietly invite a few kids to the sidelines to join us. He had another plan.

"Stop the game!" he barked. "Mr. Mac has something to tell you!" One hundred pair of eyes bore into me. Those faces weren't smiling. I was

interrupting their game. I looked at Shondra. Her head was bowed. She was praying for God to send her some kids. I thought, “This is really going to go over well,” and took a deep breath.

“Are there any kids here who want to learn how they can put their trust in Jesus and stop being afraid?” One hundred pairs of tennis shoes pointed towards me, unmoving. “Shondra and I are going to give a Bible study for a few minutes for anyone that wants to come,” I bravely offered. No one moved. I silently prayed, “Lord, please honor Shondra’s prayers. She just wants to lead someone to You!” Then I heard a pounding noise.

Four kids came running towards us like they were trying to win first prize. “We want to come!” they yelled. One more boy came running up, “Is there room for me, too?” he pleaded. Shondra and I smiled and led them into an adjoining room.

The kids dragged over a few chairs and formed a circle. Shondra cleared her throat nervously and then prayed for God to bless our study. I read a Bible text, asked what they thought it meant, explained it, and asked if they believed what God said about that step to salvation. Shondra did the same, yet something was different when Shondra shared.

The kids seemed to enjoy my friendly, comfortable way of talking with them, but when Shondra shared, the kids unconsciously leaned in their seats towards her, drinking in every word she said. When she told those kids why she

trusted Jesus with her life, they were captivated by what she said.

I leaned over to her with a bit of encouragement: “Shondra, just do the rest of the Bible study yourself. God is using you,” I whispered. “Are you sure?” She raised her eyebrows. “I’m very sure. I’ll be right beside you praying for you as you share.” That’s all the encouragement she needed. She jumped right in and didn’t waste any time.

“Kids, did you know about Jesus before this Bible study?” she asked them. Two of the children nodded their heads “Yes.” Three of the other kids shook their heads “No.” One of them said, “My parents use the name ‘Jesus’ in our home, but not the way you talk about Him. It’s usually when they are angry when they say that name and a lot of bad words, too”

“Do you understand what you heard in the Bible right now about Jesus dying for you and forgiving your sins?” Shondra asked. “Oh, yes!” The kids’ eyes sparkled. “Do you want to pray with me right now and tell Jesus you trust Him as your Savior? Do want to say, “Yes,” to having Him in your heart?” “Yep!” they agreed.

She invited the kids to kneel with her in prayer. I listened to her as she led them in giving their whole lives to Jesus Christ. Shondra finished her prayer with “...and Jesus, please come into our hearts and stay there forever.” Shondra got up, hugged the kids and gave me a great, big smile. She knew God had heard the cry of her heart.

Mentoring Moments

Read the nineteenth chapter, verses 1-10 in the Gospel of Luke in the Bible. What does Jesus' example teach you about reaching people who do not have salvation?

List who you think may not have chosen Jesus Christ as their Savior in the following:

Your Family

Your Friends

Your Neighborhood

Your Community

How can you be a friend to each one you listed? List simple ways you can show these people you care about them.

Begin to pray for the right moment to share Jesus' love and free gift of salvation with them. Write down right here why you have chosen to trust Jesus as your Savior.

Firefighters and Invisible Lines

Chapter Ten

Religious tensions run high in the Middle Eastern country where Flora and her family attended a Kids In Discipleship small group. The community around this six-year-old girl is strictly divided along religious lines. Few successfully cross these lines of separation to make new friends...or just to care.

Flora's parents, along with other adults, completed Footprints for Parents and Mentors. The small group leader invited each family represented to challenge their children to think of different ways to share Jesus' love with their community. Later, when Flora was asked for her ideas, she said, "I want us to thank the firefighters for the way they keep us safe."

Flora and her young friends drew pictures of firefighters on a hand-made card. One of the parents baked cookies. With card and cookies in hand, these children made a surprise visit to their local community fire station. The firefighters were shocked! Flora and her young friends had just walked across the invisible religious line to share their best friend, Jesus.

The men in the station gave the children a warm welcome. These strong, tough men showed

the children a tour of their station. They let the children try on their helmets, sit high up in their fire engines, and inspect their special fire fighting equipment. The men offered the children ice cream and juice as they entertained Flora and her friends with their rescue stories.

As the time came for the children to leave, one of the leaders from Flora's church asked if she could pray for the firefighters. What a picture it made as these tough, brawny men took off their hats for prayer, standing side by side with their new little friends half their height. The leader thanked God for each of the men and prayed earnestly for God to protect each man from harm and danger.

As the prayer concluded, the children said goodbye to their new friends. Some of the men furtively wiped away a few unruly tears from their eyes. Their hearts had been moved. The lines, for a moment, had been forgotten.

Mentoring Moments

What invisible lines separate you from some parts of your community?

Pray for God's blessing. Read the fifth chapter, verses 14-16, of the Gospel of Matthew in the Bible. What is God saying to you in this passage?

God often opens hearts through the innocent love of children. Invite the children in your life to think of ways they would like to share the love of Jesus with their community.

Pray with the children about their ideas. Join them in asking God to help you decide on which idea to do first.

Empower the children to act on their ideas. Provide the transportation, necessary funds, and your experience to help these children shine as they care for their community.

Take time after your service trip to debrief the children about the adventure. Ask them:

What did you learn about your community from this trip?

What did you learn about yourself?

What would you do differently next time?

What do you think Jesus would like you to do next?

Daddy from Down-Under

Chapter Eleven

Australia is known for kangaroos, koalas, friendly people, and much, much more. But when I think of the Land Down-Under, my thoughts quickly take me to the story of Derrick. By all accounts, Derrick should have died, but God had others plans for this dad.

Derrick loved his family, his volunteer work with children, and his job. After working hard for fifteen years, his diligence paid off with an offer to step up into management. He was happy to have more responsibility and a shorter work week all at the same time. Derrick thanked God for his blessings for him and his family. How quickly the good life can change.

It happened so fast! One moment he was laughing with what seemed like the world in his hands. The next moment left him wondering why the world had left him behind.

Derrick was enjoying a wonderful day off with his three-year-old daughter at the beach. It had been a perfect time together. As they drove toward home on a straight stretch of road, a car approaching from the other direction did a careless pass and slammed head-on into Derrick's car. In that moment, the laughter was over. The other driver was dead. Derrick's daughter had a broken collarbone. Derrick

suffered a shattered knee.

Five painful months later, Derrick returned to work. Soon after his return, though, he was replaced. Life was hard. Every day was difficult and agonizing. Derrick says of this time:

“What I didn’t see coming was the depression / post traumatic stress. I had a range of feelings and ended up on the verge of suicide—finding myself on the edge of a cliff, wanting to jump, but not knowing why. On the flip side, though, I knew I couldn’t end things this way because of the impact it would have on my wife and kids—it was my love for them that stopped me from going through with my thoughts.”

It was about this time that four families in Derrick’s church started a Footprints for Kids small group. These families had noticed Derrick’s depression and decided to pray for him and act on their concern. They invited Derrick and his family to be a part of their small group.

At first, Derrick wasn’t too excited about joining the group. He was depressed. He didn’t feel like coming with his family. He didn’t feel like being with anybody, but the group kept inviting.

Finally, Derrick and his family signed up for Footprints. Cautiously he joined his wife and children in the fun activities that acted like a bridge to God’s Word. He helped his children look up texts in the Bible. He discovered a fresh experience with Jesus Christ.

The other families in the group focused on

loving Derrick and his family. Each Footprints meeting began with a meal in the host home. As the weeks passed, God brought hope to Derrick through His Word and the encouragement and support he found in the small group.

Several months later, I met Derrick and his family. He came up to me with several huge, blue-tongued lizards perched on his arms and shoulders. As his family happily crowded around Derrick, I noted how God had blessed this man to move on with his life...and with his faith.

That afternoon, Derrick led me across the lawn from where I was training teams to a room jammed full of audio-visual equipment. With great enthusiasm, he told me of his volunteer work to reach unchurched children in his community. His family looked on with pride and joy at the man I call the Daddy from Down-Under.

Mentoring Moments

Derrick experienced several great losses. What losses or challenges are you facing at this time?

Pray for God's blessing. Read the fortieth chapter, verses 1-3 of the book of Psalms in the Bible. What does God want to do for you?

What steps is God calling you to take to move towards healing and healthy relationships?

Derrick could choose to use his losses as an excuse not to develop his skills to make a difference for Christ. Instead, he chose life. He chose to make a difference. What can you do to make a difference for Christ in your world?

In your community, is there someone whom you've noticed is depressed or discouraged? List several. How can you and your family reach out in love to this person?

The Boy Next Door

Chapter Twelve

Darren just showed up! Jason, Julie, and I were playing soccer in our front yard. Julie said, “Dad, there is a kid standing right behind you!” I whirled around to see who was there. A tall, skinny kid stood staring with wistful eyes at our soccer game.

“Do you want to play?” I asked him. “Sure!” he said as he ran into the game. And that was the beginning of our family’s friendship with Darren.

Just weeks before meeting Darren, our children had been asking April and me, “Who should we be sharing Jesus with? Does everybody on our street already know Him?” We had begun to pray that God would help us connect with those around us who were already looking for Jesus.

Now when you pray for God to help you find someone for Him, you don’t get to pick who He sends you! You take whomever He sends. God is the Quarterback. Each one of us is the Receiver. He calls the plays.

In the weeks that followed Darren’s first soccer game with us, he was in our yard almost every day to play with our kids. He was clearly looking for friendship. Soon, if we were working in the yard, Darren showed up. If we were

hiking in the woods behind our house, he tagged along.

“Daddy, Darren doesn’t know too much about God yet,” our kids told me a few days later after playing with Darren for the afternoon. “Why do you say that?” I asked them. “Well, he doesn’t know about Jesus. He doesn’t know Jesus wants to be his friend or that Jesus died for him. He doesn’t know any Bible stories,” they explained.

We decided to begin praying every day that God would help our kids and us share Jesus with Darren. “Daddy, Darren says bad words sometimes. Should we quit playing with him?” our kids wondered. “What would Jesus do?” I asked. Our kids wrinkled up their foreheads as they pondered the question. “Well, we guess He would play with Darren anyway!” I agreed.

A few weeks later, Jason and Jessica came up to me laughing, each child’s face was an enormous grin. “Dad, guess what happened today with Darren?” they asked. Their eyes were laughing with the fun they were about to tell me. “Today we explained to Darren that Jesus loves him and is with him all the time.” “What’s so funny about that?” I asked.

Beside themselves with glee, they explained, “Darren climbed up on our rock wall in front of the house. He looked up to the sky and shouted, ‘God, you can see ME! So watch this!’ Darren jumped off the wall and rolled over and over and over down our lawn!” Our children were bent over laughing as they told me the story. “I guess Darren is very excited that God sees him all the

time!” Jason mused.

In our home, we set aside a time every evening when we worship Jesus Christ. We sing songs about Him, we read stories about Him, we talk about what the Bible is saying, and we pray together. Our kids have grown up with family worship. It’s easy to take for granted. Our kids decided that they should invite Darren to join us.

One early evening the kids had just finished playing a marble game on our living room floor. “Time for worship!” I called. “Hey, Darren, why don’t you stay for worship?” our kids said. “Worship?” Darren’s eyebrows went up. “What’s worship?” Our kids tried to explain. “Worship is singing about Jesus, reading the Bible, talking, and praying together.”

“Sure. I’ll try it.” Darren responded cautiously. We sang songs that he didn’t know. Darren fidgeted with the marbles on the floor. We prayed for God to bless our worship. Darren looked at us with curiosity. We read a short Bible story. Darren looked absolutely lost. We discussed what we learned. Darren was so bored, he looked like he was in great pain. When we said, “Amen,” at the end of our prayers, a look of relief flooded his face. He jumped up and walked out the door. “That sure went well.” I rolled my eyes. “We need God to help us know how to make worship interesting to Darren.”

Darren loves action. He is always moving. If he’s still for more than a few seconds, we suspect that he’s ill. So with this in mind, we prayed, “Lord, you’re alive, full of joy and

power. Please help our family worship to connect Darren with you as His living God!” And we experimented.

Days passed before Darren was brave enough to join us for worship again. He approached worship like a kid facing a teaspoon of sour tasting medicine. He knew we thought it was good, but he sure didn't like the taste! But, out of a hunger for friendship, he tried it again.

“Darren, tonight we're going to worship Jesus outside! Come on, let's go.” He scrambled to his feet as a spark of interest glittered in his eyes. “Come with us!” yelled our children. Out we went into our backyard. “Somewhere out here is a little lost lamb. See how quick you all can find it.” Darren exploded into high gear. He ran his hands through the tall irises in our flower bed. He searched through the tall weeds along the fence. He raced over to an old tree stump. “I found it! I found it!” he hollered triumphantly as he held the stuffed toy lamb high in the air.

“Darren, how long would you have looked for that little lamb?” I asked. “I would've looked till I found it!” he exclaimed. “How does it feel to be lost, like the little lamb?” I probed. “Really bad. It's scary,” shivered Darren.

“Tonight we're going to read a story from the Bible about a lost sheep,” I explained. We prayed and then read the story in the back yard, right where he and our children had been hunting for the lamb. “Darren, Jesus told this story to show us what God the Father is like” I explained. “After hearing this story, what do you

know about God?” I asked. Darren looked deep in thought. “He loves me so much. He keeps looking for me until He finds me!” “Darren, you’re so right. God loves you so much He is looking for you right now!”

Worship is quite simple in our home, but it has become more alive—because of the boy next door.

Mentoring Moments

List the names of the children and parents who live around your home. How well do you know them?

Pray for God to prepare your heart for what you will read. Read the fifteenth chapter, verses 1-7 of the Gospel of Luke in the Bible. Describe God’s heart for people who do not know Him.

What are you willing to do to bless your neighbors with the love of Jesus Christ?

When will you start?

Open Your Heart, Open Your Home!

Chapter Thirteen

Expect the unexpected! When you ask God to connect you with people who are looking for Jesus, you're inviting God to set the agenda. You might have to rethink your comfort zone!

As I drive home, I'm thinking of slowing down, connecting with my family, and being away from everything and everybody else. I just want to be home. How about you? For years, I've driven past rows of houses in my neighborhood, given quick smiles and waves to those along the street, and ducked into my home as though it were a cave. Darren has helped to change all that!

Darren is often in my home already when I arrive. Sometimes he runs from his house to meet me as I climb out of the car. He loves to lend a hand and often helps bring in the groceries, get the mail, or carry in firewood. With Darren here, I must forget coming home to my cave.

Darren really enjoys meeting new people and getting to know them. When he made friends with our family, he wanted to be with us—in our home. He wanted to do what we were doing: work with us, play games with us, and worship

with us. In the summer, on vacation, weekends, and at any evening—Darren often shows up. One summer, April said he often knocked at our door over ten times in one day! (By the way, as I'm writing this reflection, he just knocked at our door to see if it's time for worship.)

During one of our family evening worships, we sat outside overlooking the woods. We read the Bible's description of Heaven and drew pictures of what Heaven might look like. Darren hunched over his drawing paper with great concentration as he tried to draw a place that sounded too good to be true. "When can I go to Heaven?" he asked.

"When Jesus comes again, He will take us to Heaven," I answered. "You know what, Darren? Jesus wants to be in our home right now as we're waiting for Heaven!" Darren sighed wistfully and then said, "I wish Jesus was in my home!" Now, as I reflect on that time in Darren's development, I know Jesus was already working on that.

Several years have passed since we first met Darren. During that time, we've kept our home open to Darren. We've also kept our hearts open to him. One evening when I had come home from work more tired than usual, I sat quietly at the supper table with my family without my usual humor and enthusiasm. It took me a moment to see that Julie was trying to get my attention at the end of the table.

"Dad, something happened with Darren in our back yard this afternoon!" Julie said. I suddenly

felt very awake. I had no idea what Darren had done, but I knew I wanted to know. Clearing my throat, I tried to respond with a calm voice. “Julie, tell me about it. What happened?”

“Well...” Julie dragged her voice out dramatically. “Today Darren asked Jesus into his heart!” Her eyes literally shone. “I asked him if he wanted to trust Jesus with his life and he said, ‘Yes!’ Jason and I shared what Jesus teaches in the Bible about having Him as your Savior. We told him why we trusted Jesus. Dad, Darren has never prayed aloud with us before. He asked Jesus into his heart!”

Joy flooded my heart. As a family, we had prayed many months for this day. “Julie, I’m so excited about what God did through you and Jason. This is not for your glory, but for His! If you are humble and ask God to help you tell others about Jesus, He’ll give you many more people to share Him with!”

The days flew by. On a Friday evening a few years later, I was slicing tomatoes, potatoes, onions, celery, and squash. The water was boiling in the pot. The kids were cleaning the house. April was ironing. I tossed the potatoes and some seasoning in the pot and sniffed the aroma. “Ahh. This is going to be good. It’s nice to have a peaceful evening with the family,” I thought to myself.

Rap! Rap! Rap! My silent reflection was broken. Julie raced to our front door. Moments later, she strode over to me and whispered, “Dad, Darren is at the door. He wants to know if he can make

supper with you.” I sucked in my breath and let out a long sigh. “Well...” I stalled, thinking about my dream of a quiet evening melting away before my eyes. “Dad, he really, really wants to help you,” Julie challenged me. “Okay. Tell him he can come in and help,” I submitted.

Darren jumped through the open door when he got the news. Julie just smiled as he flew past her. “Wash up, buddy,” I directed. He ran to the sink and was back again in too few seconds. I looked at his hands. “Darren, you’d better wash two more times from your fingers to your elbows.” When he finally returned, I put the eager young chef to work.

He grabbed the cutting board and placed it right beside mine. “What can I do first?” he asked, beaming. I dropped two onions on his board. “Start with slicing these,” I said.

I chopped carrots in silence, trying to retool my brain for connecting with my young friend. Suddenly, Darren broke the silence. “Can I ask you a question?” he inquired. “Sure.” I agreed. “I want to be baptized. How do I do that?” he asked.

As we prepared vegetables, we talked about how baptism is walking across the line for Jesus. We had a wonderful conversation about the joy of having Jesus in his heart and his heart’s desire to live his whole life for Jesus. The soup that night tasted extra good!

Our family enjoyed studying the Bible with Darren during the following weeks. We knew he

had accepted Christ as his Savior. It was a faith adventure for us as we watched God give him a foundation for his faith.

On the day that he was baptized, we were as excited as Darren! His parents came to witness their son's commitment for Christ. We all clapped our hands with thankful hearts as he came up out of the water.

It's all too easy to hide in our homes. I know. I think of Darren's knock at our door that Friday night and smile with a grateful heart. I say, "Thank you, Lord, for opening up our hearts and our home. Please keep them both open to You and those You send."

Mentoring Moments

List the people that seem to keep coming into your life. Is it possible that God is sending them?

Cooking, hiking, eating meals, and playing basketball are some of the activities in my life that have become bridges to connect with people in my neighborhood and community. List activities that could serve to connect you with children and families in your neighborhood.

Read the eighteenth chapter, verses 1-10 of the book of Genesis in the Bible. Describe Abraham's care for the three visitors. What simple things can you do to make children and families in your neighborhood feel welcome in your home?

Ask God to bring people to you and to your home. He is the Great Connector of the Universe. He will help you!

Now Is the Time

Chapter 14

God opens the third chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes with these well-known verses:

“There is a time for everything,

and a season for every activity
under heaven:

a time to be born and a time to
die,

a time to plant and a time to
uproot

a time to kill and a time to heal,

a time to tear down and a time
to build,

a time to mourn and a time to
dance,

a time to scatter stones and a
time to gather them,

a time to embrace and a time to
refrain,

a time to search and a time to
give up,

a time to keep and a time to
throw away,

a time to tear and a time to
mend,

a time to be silent and a time to
speak,

a time to love and a time to hate,

a time for war and a time for
peace.

What does the worker gain from
his toil?

I have seen the burden God has
laid on men.

He has made everything
beautiful in its time..."

Friend, what is God calling you to BE in these last days? As you have read these simple stories of God at work in the lives of children and families, do you sense that the Holy Spirit of God is calling you to be someone who trusts, follows, and shares Jesus? By the grace and life-transforming power of Jesus, you can BE that kind of person!

What is God calling you to DO in these momentous times? Is there a child or grandchild in your life who needs your heart, your time, your faith? What if you gave God your time,

talent, and treasure to reach this generation for Christ? What would God do through you?

I invite you to stop and pray before you reread the Bible passage that opens this final chapter. Really. Stop and ask God to clarify in your mind what His perfect timing is for you right now as you reread the Bible passage. Have you read it? Now what is God saying to you? Share what you are impressed to do—with someone who loves you enough to pray for you to do what you are impressed to do!

Someday soon, Jesus WILL come again. He longs to have you, your family, and the children and families across the world with Him forever! This is His dream.

Now is the time to rethink what you've considered important. Now is the time to come before God as you are, to find acceptance, forgiveness, and love that won't let you go. Now is the time to humble yourself before your Savior Jesus Christ, and by His grace, to turn away from anything that would distract you from:

Your relationship with Him

Your family

Your God-given mission

There is a generation of children among us who could be brought to Jesus. They could be loved, valued, and cherished—whether they are our own or the child next door. These children could

be mentored to trust Jesus with their very lives. They could be taught to have such a solid faith foundation in God's Word that they will follow Jesus wherever He leads them. They could be empowered to share the Jesus they know and love with their whole world!

Reader, don't hold back from doing what God has dreamed for you to do. Now is the time to be counted for what matters most to the heart of God. Your life can make a difference in the life of a child now and throughout eternity. Live your life inside-out for Jesus. Then this generation will see Christ in you, will covet what you have in Him, will live for Him, and will boldly champion Him beyond any other generation.