

APPARENT FAITH



What Fatherhood Taught Me
About the Father's Heart

KARL FOREHAND

What Folks Are Saying About

APPARENT FAITH

“Karl Forehand is a pastor and seeker who has been on a profound spiritual journey—a journey that led him away from narrow, judgmental fundamentalism into the deep, gracious richness of the kingdom of Christ. I call this the water to wine journey. Karl’s journey has not been without pain, but it has been beautiful. In *Apparent Faith*, Karl tells his deeply personal story of seeking and finding the pearl of great price. I am sure this poignant book will resonate with many readers.”

—BRIAN ZAHND, LEAD PASTOR OF WORD OF LIFE CHURCH IN ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI AND AUTHOR OF WATER TO WINE

“In *Apparent Faith*, Karl Forehand gently guides his readers through his journey of faith and reveals what many before him have begun to find: God is not a monster. God is wholly loving, truly good, and God, when it is all said and done, is just like Jesus. This is a book that will challenge many, but it is written with such care that readers will not be able to help but see the beauty within the pages. A thoroughly enjoyable and accessible read indeed.”

—MATTHEW J. DISTEFANO, AUTHOR OF 4 BOOKS AND CO-HOST OF THE HERETIC HAPPY HOUR PODCAST

“In these pages Karl Forehand pulls back the veneer of superficiality and honestly reflects on his journey of struggle and faith. He courageously tells his story as a pastor who began to ask difficult questions within the narrow confines of the fundamentalist Christian faith he had always known. He discovers the beauty of God revealed in Jesus Christ, the personal God of trinitarian love, the God of endless creativity and moral goodness. His rediscovery of the ever-present God becomes a source of healing and transformation for Karl's heart and the centerpiece of his evolving beliefs about the nature of God, the Bible, the church, prayer, justice, war, parenting, and politics. Told in candor and reflection, Karl reflects on his life as a pastor and, more importantly, he reflects on his life as a parent, allowing his children to be his muse. This book will encourage and inspire you wherever you are on your faith journey.”

—DEREK VREELAND, DISCIPLESHIP PASTOR AT WORD OF LIFE CHURCH, ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI AND AUTHOR OF *BY THE WAY: GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT FOLLOWING JESUS*

“Reading *Apparent Faith* is like reading a journal: someone's touching and honest journal account of their journey towards a more Christlike God. Karl Forehand learned about the nature of God by taking a close look at the relationship between him and his children and shares those lessons with us. I'm thankful that Karl has shared his beautiful, painful, and honest journey with us. As he continued to walk in the darkness and shared his experiences with uncertainty and mystery, I couldn't help but think of Wendell Berry's words: *The mind that is not baffled is not employed / The impeded stream is the one that sings.* Thank you Karl for your gift!”

—JOE BEACH, PASTOR AT AMAZING GRACE CHURCH

“Karl’s story is not theory. His curiosity and courage have led him and many others to dance in life in a better way. I have watched Karl walk through fear time and time again to find life. I hope this book inspires you to do the same.”

—**BRAD HILL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HEARTCONNEXION SEMINARS, AUTHOR, AND PODCASTER**

“Karl writes in a real, earthy, moving way that touches the heart of the reader. Thanks for sharing this.”

—**S. MARCIA ZISKA, OSB MOUNT ST. SCHOLASTICA, ATCHISON, KS.**

“If I could somehow distill into words my story of being a father, husband, and a follower of Jesus, I am uncertain I would be able to do it better than Karl has here. This book gripped me, pulling emotions from me in the best ways. Karl, like so many of us, has leaned into Jesus and found something so beautiful and worth following—seeing beauty in both light and dark places.”

—**SETH PRICE, HOST OF CAN I SAY THIS AT CHURCH PODCAST**

“For better or worse, many of us form our image of God from our relationship with our earthly father. In *Apparent Faith*, Karl Forehand makes a heartwarming and compelling case that God reveals just as much of Himself in and through our relationships with our own children—pointing us to a love without limits and hope without end. This book will help you discover the Father we all long for; subtly hidden within so many of the relationships of life.”

—**JASON ELAM, HOST OF THE MESSY SPIRITUALITY PODCAST**

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***What Fatherhood Taught Me
About the Father's Heart***

KARL FOREHAND

To my children
Jordan (J.D.), Abigail (Abbey), and Lily (L.B.)

and to my grandchildren
Hollyn and Jackson (J.B.)

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Life is interesting at times. This book heavily involves my children, who used to have a baby sitter named Tricia, who married a guy named Jeremiah Davis who grew up to be, among other things, an editor and formed Vanguard Publishing House. So, guess who did most of the editing on this book? The life of a writer is extremely interdependent on the necessary and vital work they do. At times I despise editors for changing my work, and at other times I want to kiss their feet. Kind of like most things in life, I guess. Here's to you Jeremiah! This book is better because of you!

As long as I have dreamed about being a writer, I have dreamed about having a publisher. To be honest, I didn't think it would ever happen. As I became acquainted with Keith Giles, he recommended talking to Rafael (Ralph) Polendo at Quoir Publishing. Surprise! He said yes! For a while, I kept sending cryptic messages to verify that it was indeed true! Quoir produces the popular podcast, Heretic Happy Hour, among other things. As I have come to know some of their writers like Matthew Distefano, Jamal Jivanjee, and the aforementioned Keith Giles, I feel like I'm the luckiest writer in the world. They are exactly the right fit as they are challenging the same boundaries that I am challenging, and they are doing it well! I look forward to many years of doing this thing we're doing right now!

When I first met Brian Zahnd, I didn't know whether I would like him—let's just leave it at that. It still surprises me that I call Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri my home. I was never a charismatic before and I pastored smaller churches, but I have grown to love Brian and Peri Zahnd and Derek Vreeland and others of the pastors and members there. More than anything, I admire their courage. They are rejecting the certainty of pop Christianity and striking out on journeys to discover a more authentic faith. They are doing this individually and corporately to some extent. I respect them for having the courage to do this, while trying to preserve the church and care for the people involved. They don't complain about it, but I know it is not an easy journey. I am extremely thankful for my church and pastors even though I'm probably not the best member sometimes! *L'Chaim* my friends!

Dr. Paul Fitzgerald and his wife, Susanna, have served as guides to us at various times in our lives. Approximately 20 years ago, they led us through an immersive experience called Breakthrough where we felt like we gained a new lease on life. After a couple of decades of pastoral work, I needed to experience this process again and Laura and I enlisted them as guides once more. When I needed a friend and mentor, it was like Dr. Paul suddenly appeared in my life again. He never offers advice I don't ask for, but he is always there with just the right thing to say. I suspect it is because he is a few steps down the path on a similar journey as me. I appreciate Dr. Paul and Susanna and I consider them two of my closest friends. They are the type of people that genuinely spiritually reproduce and legitimately impact the world. They are the real deal in a world of imposters. I love you guys!

FOREWORD

It has been a joy to journey with Karl and Laura as they explore the “wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea” even when it feels more like a wild ride into the unknown destination. Celtic Christians called this a “perigrinatio”—a passionate journey without a specific destination into the unknown that was as much an inner journey to discover their truest self in Christ.

The Forehand’s family story reflects the risk we all face in suddenly waking up to see so clearly something to which we have been blind, and it can be quite troubling—light in darkness may be shocking and yet enticingly invite us to explore the unfamiliar. Being available to be surprised by God is key to deep spiritual growth beyond the limits of logic we feel gives us control.

John’s Gospel begins by naming the resistance of darkness—our falsely-centered self and our collective cultural, political, economic false-self systems—and the blindness to which even the most intensely religious people are subject:

“What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness could not put it out...The Life-Light was the real thing: Every person entering Life he brings into Light. He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world did not even notice. He came to his own people, but they did not want him.”¹

Sometimes deep intuitions resist our desire to stay safe and awaken us to more going on than our normal ego-centered awareness wants us to know. It can be shocking to see the beauty of something we have dismissed as unimaginable. We do not create those ‘exceptional’ moments, they are there stirring in us, calling us to embrace doubt as a doorway to deeper faith.

The courageous act to follow our intuitive knowing—rather than analyze the experience as an observer—may shake our ordinary life-planning to the core. It is likely that we will be tempted to dismiss them as irrational, a ‘bad dream,’ silly, or crazy. Our current path’s predictable safety can make the journey feel that too much is at risk to allow the intrusion of those Divine moments to register as more real than our illusions.

The paradox is that embracing and acting on those ‘break through’ moments can bring renewed strength, courage, meaning and energy for life. And, as Karl’s story illustrates, it also brings a time of ‘deconstruction,’ a feeling that the very foundations of what we have assumed to be true are being undermined. Talking to friends and family can feel too risky and often result in their attempting to rescue us from ourselves. Too quickly this can turn into rejection if our changes threaten their working illusions.

Sometimes our courage fails us, and we turn back to the comfortable path we think we know. Yet, it may not be possible to completely deaden the yearning that revisits us in strange ways. Once we begin, the temptation to go back is very real. There is strength in finding some welcoming souls who are a few steps ahead and experiencing more trust in the Mystery than our logic and rational skills to return to control.

May Karl, Laura and the Forehand family's journey inspire you to journey into the wideness and wildness of grace.

John O'Donohue describes the challenge we are all invited to explore:

“If we can somehow bring the difficult things with us into the realm and light of our souls, it is unbelievable the healing that will achieve itself in us. I think that we are infinitely greater than our minds and we are infinitely more than our images of ourselves. One of the sad things today is that so many people are frightened by the wonder of their own presence. They are dying to tie themselves into a system, a role, or to an image, or to a predetermined identity that other people have settled on for them. This identity may be totally at variance with the wild energies that are rising inside their souls. Many of us get very afraid and we eventually compromise. We settle for something that is safe, rather than engaging the danger and the wildness that is in our own hearts. We should never forget that death is waiting for us.”²

Godspeed,

—Paul Fitzgerald, D.Min.

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INTRODUCTION

It started with a simple statement: “Maybe I am wrong.”

Now, this wasn’t something I said because I had just quit my job, or gone on a 3-month sabbatical, or suffered through a midlife crisis. Nothing that dramatic. But I was beginning to have my suspicions and doubts; and eventually found myself losing confidence in the faith that I had invested my life in.

I was a bi-vocational pastor spending most of my free time pursuing “The Lord’s Work.” But what I most wanted out of life at this time was to be a little more sure of what I seemed so sure about.

Faith is, after all, a kind of assurance. There’s a measure of comfort in knowing the Truth. As I had learned as a pastor, Evangelicalism requires a fair amount of certainty about what you believe. But it can also provoke questions in other areas of your life. These you can either ignore or address. Most tend to ignore them, I think. But I started to address them.

Over the course of several years, I began to question everything. Were my beliefs right? How did I determine this? What if it is not right? What if it is? Maybe I am wrong?

As I asked myself these questions, my faith began to crack at the foundations like a towering skyscraper and it began to sway. Repeatedly, I found myself in the role of an apologist. Eventually

asking myself, “Why do I always have to defend those particular beliefs?” And again, “What if I am wrong?”

Maybe in a rush to be so certain about my faith, as an evangelical, I determined some things incorrectly. I started to wonder if some things don't really require such certainty. Maybe the answers would come later? Still, I felt compelled to probe a little deeper.

Around this time, I had some health issues and implemented some corrective actions involving diet and exercise. Going through that, I was so excited to be feeling better that I wanted to tell others what I was experiencing. I've always felt that our lives involve body, soul and spirit and we often neglect what we don't understand.

To my surprise, I received a lot of criticism, even ridicule, from people in my former denomination. They would say things like “you talk about nutrition too much” and would laugh whenever I talked about making changes to my diet or exercise habits. Maybe I didn't *need* to convince them, but it did hurt a little to be minimized. Eventually, I realized my change made some people uncomfortable, so I stopped talking about the changes my wife and I had made in our lifestyle. This was not really a spiritual thing, but it was part of our gradual process of disconnecting from the system we were in.

After becoming the clichéd, irritating health food nut, I committed the next big sin: I discovered yoga, and I loved it! In my limited experience, I am convinced of its health benefits, and have continued to enjoy it intermittently for several years. What really surprised me was when one of the leaders in the church refused to take communion from me until he could address this “yoga issue” with me. Later that week, he invited me to dinner.

The conversation did not resolve his frustration, and it only served to raise my level of disappointment with the state of the church. I don't fault this person, but it left me wondering, "Why are people not happy for me when my health is improving?" Again, I asked the question, "Maybe I am wrong," or "Maybe I was wrong all along."

These were just surface issues. On a deeper level, I felt like I was pretending to be happy and being pressured to ascribe to things I was losing faith in, and at the same time I was beginning to feel estranged from the communities we once drew strength from.

Eventually, it became clear to me that I needed to get outside my role as a pastor and discover what I truly believed so that I could find peace and be able to express that peace to others. I longed to go deeper into the faith I confessed. The statement, "Maybe I am wrong" had changed from a question into a conviction. I was no longer the apologist or fraud I feared I might be. I was me.

Several months later, I resigned from the church I was a part of. This was more like a divorce than a simple resignation from office. Most of the people we knew in those circles stop communicating with us completely. That's when I began to examine everything. I knew I needed people I cared about in my life to walk with me on this journey. I reconnected with an old friend, Dr. Paul Fitzgerald, who runs an immersive program called Breakthrough. My wife Laura and I had been through the program before and trusted him. His teaching on shame and grace had been instrumental in my life already. That first time through his program we probably were more focused on marital issues—this time we needed help with the second half of our life.

Dr. Paul reads a copious number of books. When we invited him on our journey, he recommended books to get us started. Some of the more memorable were:

- *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*, Brian Zahnd
- *The Bible Tells Me So*, Peter Enns
- *A More Christlike God*, Brad Jersak
- *Falling Upward*, Richard Rohr

I remember one morning having breakfast with Dr. Paul and his wife as they told us about Wm. Paul Young and the film based on his book, *The Shack*. The intensity in their voice encouraged us to see this movie. We almost felt like we might be the only persons in the world that had not seen it by the tone of their voices. We watched the movie later that week and bought tickets to see the author speak in person. That movie, and Paul Young's stories, left us speechless.

Something truly was awakened in us that had been dormant for a long time. It had been awhile since I read and considered such challenging ideas—I was hungry for more!

As I started to read those books that Dr. Paul had recommended to us, I found that, while all of these authors were further down the road than I was, they all seemed to be on the same journey towards a common destination. A journey towards a God who was less violent and retributive than I had been taught and a faith that was more about love and mercy. My long-held assumptions and traditions were being challenged and I felt like I was ready to let go but I did not know how.

Eventually I met Brian and Peri Zahnd and began attending the church they pastored—Word of Life Church, in St. Joseph, MO. This was an important part of the journey.

Later, I read Paul Young's book, *Lies We Believe About God*. It was what I was looking for, but not entirely ready to hear. Some of what I read I believed but some of it I immediately dismissed. As I would read the book, I would often catch myself saying, "Wow!", then pause and ponder what I had just read before moving on. I would do this repeatedly—opening, closing, opening, closing—rinse and repeat, until I got to the end of the book.

Many of my long-held beliefs were challenged, but a grander shift was happening in me. After reading the book and thinking through all the things I was considering, I made the following assessment:

"Some of my beliefs lead to a natural conclusion that I am better than God. As a parent I do things a certain way (and I am not perfect). My belief system says that God does things or did things a certain way. My belief is in question because it leads to a conclusion that God is worse than me."

That's when it all began to change for me. Maybe I am wrong about hell, particularly the idea that God punishes people forever for rejecting him. Still, I can't help but wonder how God can love the world, be so unendingly full of grace and mercy, and have so much vengeful anger that his anger results in people suffering for eternity? That feels like a contradiction of his character that I can't simply ignore any longer.

I began to wonder how a perfect God could be a worse Father than me. I kept coming back to the Sophia scene from *The Shack* and asking myself, "Which of my children I would eternally torment for not believing in or disobeying me or just continuing to be rebellious?" I determined I could not—I cannot—I will not!

My presuppositions shattered and I determined something was going to have to change. If you are anything like I used to be, I see you that you are poised to run. I understand how you

feel as these kinds of considerations used to frighten me as well. I felt the same way, but I stayed on the journey long enough to satisfy my curiosity and find some peace. I don't ask that you accept everything I say—just journey with me.

One final note. You may notice a lack of Scriptural reference in this book. You can find answers for that in the chapter titled “The Bible,” but I do not recommend jumping ahead just yet. The main reason I chose not to have a lot of references to the Bible is I feel Scripture has become a weapon to defend our inherited and predetermined agenda instead of a fertile soil for our faith. Scripture is an important part of my life and undergirds much of my journey, but what follows is not a theological debate and not in any way intended to defend a certain set of beliefs. This is my journey and I offer these stories that are sacred to me that you may somehow share the journey with me.

The path ahead of you may or may not be shrouded in mystery, however there are many bumps and surprising turns hidden in the veil called faith. It is easier to remain complacent and not move forward. Stability and tradition can seem to be less of a challenge than what is ahead—less threatening if you are not running pell-mell into the chaos.

Faith, we are told, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen. But what happens when the path takes you on a journey into the darker side of faith, each step challenging prior convictions even as it is building new ones?

Nevertheless, we must press forward. Let us walk together, you and I, and in so doing find peace.

—Karl J. Forehand, 2019

Section 1

DISCOVERIES

GOD'S DISPOSITION TOWARDS US

The biggest surprise of parenthood came during a late-night meetup at an IHOP restaurant with my family. My wife, Laura, and I had orchestrated a get together with our children (not an easy task with three adult children). Sometime early in the conversation with them I realized, “They are teaching me. This is going to make me a better man.” They were not lecturing me and they probably didn’t even have an agenda, but I was learning from the conversation my wife and I were having with them.

As a young adult I had dreamed about all the things I would teach my children. I remember preparing to answer their questions so they would look at me with wonder and amazement. I imagined them marveling at my theology degree infused brilliance, replying at my every turn with, “Dad, you are a masterful thinker and wise sage. Please, share more!” I was a little disappointed at how little they asked me for advice; mostly, they just watched what I did.

Even more surprising than their lack of need for my wisdom was their apparent ability to learn for themselves. I taught them to think for themselves early on, and I was humbled when they learned on their own. A steady march from there led to independence and I heard myself thinking, “It will not be long before

they do not need me at all.” Of course, that is the goal, but the perceived rejection still hurt a little.

Somewhere in my Fatherhood journey, I was inspired to compare my relationship with God to my role as a father. Is not God’s relationship with me supposed to be a lot like a father and a child? God can be imagined as many things, but when I compared him to my experience as a father, I knew he was showing me a deeper part of himself, a true part of himself. I knew God would not turn his back on us because I would never turn my back on my children.

A common belief among many Christians is that God turns away from us when we sin. It was imagined that even Jesus experienced this on the cross when he absorbed our sins. The assumption is that the Father is so holy he cannot look at sin—so he separates or hides Himself from us.

I told each of them several times throughout their childhood and beyond, “No matter what you do, I will never change how I feel about you.” When they made bad choices, it did not drive me away from them—it made me want to draw closer.

As a father, I find this hard to accept. One of the primary reasons is, as a created being, I promised my children I would never leave them.

I told each of them several times throughout their childhood and beyond, “No matter what you do, I will never change how I feel about you.” When they made bad choices, it did not drive me away from them—it made me want to draw closer. I know people that have disowned their children because they made

mistakes. This seems selfish to me because it is usually the parent trying to avoid embarrassment. Although I understand what it is like when my children made mistakes, it doesn't seem like love to turn away from them in their distress.

In the creation story, after Adam and Eve made a bad choice for themselves, they hid like all children are prone to do when they realize their mistake. Out of love as a Father, God came looking for Adam—God did not pull away nor allow them to remain hidden. He went looking for them. Prodigal sons and daughters worry in shame over past mistakes, while the Father's heart in us propels us to search for them, to run to them with arms open wide.

Another area that can be confusing to Christians is “God's work.” My children were not always perfect like they are now (both of us are laughing right now). Whenever I would ask them to take out the trash, they would do the “wobbly legs” dance. With the dance, they were trying to communicate that they were so tired they could not possibly do one more thing or they would collapse under the weight of their many burdens. It goes without saying that they had been sitting in the same position for more than an hour, but rationalizing things like that will sometimes drive you crazy as a parent. Often, I just took out the trash myself to avoid the battle.

When I was a young parent, I imagined that all my children would lighten my load, that they would learn to work and do their chores. All my children are good workers, but they never did much work for me. After all, most kids just want to relax when they came home—just like I did. They did their work at school, and when they got older had their own jobs. My children did not want to be my slaves--they wanted to be part of the

family. I believe we need to examine our views of how God views our service. Is it an expected duty where we are “used” by God or is it what we do out of love for others? I think my children are just now understanding how this works in a family.

If you have ever been to a church service, then you know that most church literature is packed with missional injunctions about being “used” by God. Sadly, it is a common theme especially among evangelicals. “Here am I, send me” and being “used by God” are common themes we hear hammered out of the pulpit, all whilst faintly on the organ “Onward Christian Soldiers” is being played—our cue to march forward and do God’s work. Try to suggest this to an abuse victim, apply being “used by God” to your children—say out loud “I want to use my children for my purposes.” The Father’s heart roars like a lion in protest because no one likes to be used. It is too easy for use to become abuse. I do not think this is the way God sees his Family, nor how Christ sees his Bride, the Church. God did not create us to use us. I can no longer accept this.

I like the way Bob Goff approaches this issue in his book *Love Does*:

“I think a father’s job, when it is done best, is to get down on both knees, lean over his children’s lives, and whisper, ‘Where do you want to go?’ Every day God invites us on the same kind of adventure. It is not a trip where He sends us a rigid itinerary, He simply invites us. God asks what it is He’s made us to love, what it is that captures our attention, what feeds that deep indescribable need of our souls to experience the richness of the world He made. And then, leaning over us, He whispers, ‘Let’s go do *that* together.’”

Discipline is another area that can confuse us about God. Two of my children were easy to scare into submission when they were out of control with only a strong look. The other child

was very stubborn and once destroyed her room because she was mad. I can still remember the stare of my oldest daughter. For whatever reason, I was determined to get her to eat her supper. I am sure she was not starving to death and there likely was not a good reason except that she was defying me. I am sure it was not the first time and probably not the last. Out of frustration, I spanked her. She did not cry—she did not run to her room—all she did was stare at me! I remember walking away. Like many things in Fatherhood, the moment you think you've figured it out, the family throws you a curve.

I realized that discipline has its limits and what my children often needed more than to be disciplined was my understanding and compassion. They were often frustrated more than rebellious, more confused than confrontational, and in need of grace, mercy, and compassion more than punishment. They needed me to be more restorative than retributive. They needed me to lead them home.

They were often frustrated more than rebellious, more confused than confrontational, and in need of grace, mercy, and compassion more than discipline.

Sometimes they really needed me to listen and it was in those moments that I learned God's discipline may be something different than what I imagined. It is more obvious to me now that God is not a god that is waiting to punish me.

I know I taught my children many things, but sitting in that IHOP restaurant with my wife and children, I saw that most of what they learned from me they learned more by my example—not my verbal instruction. And I can delight in my children

because of that. And maybe that is what family is all about, finding delight in our children as we spend time with them until they enter adulthood and do the same. I know one thing for sure, I cannot imagine a life without my wife and children in it and I am learning that God feels the same way towards his family too.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Reflect on the statements below. Don't overthink it, just let it flow. You can analyze it later.

1. Describe your previous perception of how God feels about you and contrast that with how your perception of that is changing?
 - Is God looking down at you or across?
 - How big is God in relation to you?
 - Is God distant or near?
 - What colors do you see?
 - What is the primary feeling you are having about this?
 - What else do you see in the picture?
2. What are several words that summarize your thoughts about this chapter or what is a quote you would like to remember?

ORIGINAL GOOD AND PARENTS

Our second grandchild was born recently. He was born via C-section eight weeks early. Emotions flowed over me like a river when I considered meeting my new grandson. I was overwhelmed with joy for my granddaughter who was born a year earlier, and I now wondered, “Would I have the same feelings for Jackson?” When it finally did happen, when I finally looked at his face, I thought, “Perfection!” What I mean is not that he was perfect, but that he was innocent and good and precious. And he was exactly who he was supposed to be. I did not see evil in his demeanor. In a special way that every parent knows, I saw God in his eyes. Once again, I was blown away.

In the creation story, God looked at creation and said several times, “That is good.” After he created man, he looked at his creation and said, “That is very good.” When I look at a baby, I think, “This is good!” Babies are a miracle—such an expression of innocence—a thing of beauty. They are, inside and out, “very good.”

My granddaughter, Hollyn, appears to be very determined like her mother. Like Abbey, she sometimes refuses to do certain things like wear her gloves. I think my daughter already knows so I do not tell her, “Give up, you’re not going to win the battle—it is not that important.” But there are many other times when

she is not being stubborn. And, that is when I see the goodness! When Hollyn sits and listens to an Avett Brothers song with me, my mind goes back to a picture of Abbey with her grandpa. They were very close. And in both of their eyes I see pure delight, I see mystery, I see all the good things I love about God.

As a pastor, I had the privilege to hold dozens of babies. Many times, I was the first person to hold the baby after the mother had given the first feeding. My eyes were always drawn to the tiny little toes and fingernails that seemed so perfect. Occasionally though, I was lucky enough to get a quick glance as the young soul blinked open their eyes. I am told that what they see at this point is blurry, unfocused and limited.

But what I saw was clear! This creation of God was nothing but goodness, purity and sweetness.

But what I saw was clear! This creation of God was nothing but goodness, purity and sweetness. You do not have to prompt people to “ooh” and “ahh” over a baby; they do it spontaneously because what they are seeing is good!

In many religions, there is a core belief that we are originally bad. I do not think we can deduce that from the creation story though, and I cannot conclude it from looking at my own children. God the Father does not hide behind Jesus to look at us any more than I hide behind my children to see my grandchildren. I believe he looks at us like I looked at my grandson, Jackson. He looks at us like I see my granddaughter, Hollyn, when I sing Avett Brothers’ songs to her.

My children have introduced me to podcasts. To me, they are like the new cassette tapes, except I do not have to lug them around with me to then get destroyed when I leave them in the

floorboard of the car. Recently, I was listening to Richard Rohr on a podcast and the only thing I can remember (and I am paraphrasing here) is this:

“God is not trying to create a new version of ourselves because we were originally bad. God is trying to remove the false self we have accumulated and return us to our true self that is originally good.”

I have been conditioned by the things that have happened to me. When children made fun of me or adults harshly scolded me, it seemed to build up a layer of shame that caused me to change my view of myself and the world. When I made mistakes, as we all do, the world did not always respond in healthy, restorative ways. Our world is very retributive and when I exchanged insult for insult with the world, it only caused me to build up a false self that was nothing like the infant I saw in the hospital. I realized that I did not know the true self inside me. I forgot that I was once a newborn that my mother carried down the stairs of a clinic in Edmond, OK. I failed to remember that I once had perfect little toes that deserved a second glance. I forgot that she once looked into my eyes and said, “This is good!”

I once wrote a story called, “I Wanted Him to Score a Touchdown.” It was about when I watched my son play football. My assessment of his interest in football was that he enjoyed being on the team more than playing the game. He was a jokester and loved to make people happy. In retrospect, those are much better life qualities than succeeding at a game, but in this part of the world it is easy to get wrapped in all of it.

But there he was on the two-yard line. He was a blocking back and did not carry the ball—instead he was always all-to-happy to clear the way for his friend. For some reason, I knew he was going to get the ball that day and I was ecstatic. “I just want him

to score one touchdown,” I thought, as I screamed at the top of my lungs, “Go, go, go!” Sure enough, he took the hand-off but very soon felt the wrath of the opposing defensive line. My heart sank. I felt so bad for him as he fell inches short. “Can I get a measurement?” Moments later, I observed another impassioned parent. This guy’s son was one of the biggest guys on the team which was one of the reasons for the team’s success. As I watched him live and die with his son on the field, I began to wonder whether we were doing the right thing. His commentary was sometimes encouraging, but other times it was downright shaming and a little too harsh for the situation. I wonder whether we were encouraging these young men or frustrating them?

What would God do if he watched a football game with all his children?

When I was a young parent, I thought it was my job to push my children to be “more.” Whatever that means! I felt like they needed me to focus on their performance and try to push them to new heights. Even now with my children all adults, it is tempting to go too far with this model. When I think about how things will look and how it will reflect on me, I can very easily push them, not to excellence, but to frustration.

I was taught that God has a very high standard. This “mark” or expectation is basically unreachable. But it goes further than that. God knows that this standard is unreachable, but it drives him insane when we cannot meet this standard. It makes him so angry that he dreams of tormenting us forever. It reminds me of parents in the stands of athletic events dreaming of their children’s performance and losing their minds when they fail to perform! “This is not what we expect from you,” they would yell at the top of their lungs. I used to believe that was how God

felt about our sin. Then, I noticed what Jesus did. I saw that he looked upon people with compassion. I saw that he said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Every parent of teenagers should learn that phrase.

We do not go to as many sporting events these days. Someday, I am sure we will be asked to attend some type of performance for the grandchildren. My greatest hope is that I will be a better observer than I have been in the past. I hope I will scold less and encourage more. I hope I will not generate unrealistic expectations of my grandchildren, but instead learn to delight in them like God delights in me. I hope I can learn to expect them to be who they truly are.

Life is full of firsts. With children, there is the first word, the first step, the first tooth, the first date, the first day of school. But there is also the first time they rebel or stay out past curfew or tell you "you are the worst parent ever!" I was trying to remember specific instances of their rebellion. The truth is, for me, it is very hard to remember those instances of their defiance or poor performance. At the time, they seemed devastating, and although I remember the emotions of embarrassment and shame, I cannot remember the actual stories. What I do remember are the times of reconciliation afterward.

My best memories of interacting with my children all end with me admitting I was wrong. I remember once when my daughter, Lily, confronted me. Lily has always been very intelligent and has grown to be a strong, intelligent woman, and mother of my grandson. I know it is not accurate, but I remember her speaking without a breath for 20 minutes. I remember feeling like what she said was very disrespectful, but then something made me listen a little closer. What I eventually discerned from her speech is that

both of us have expectations in our relationship. One side of me wanted to just say, “Listen, you need to be more respectful,” but, the other side of me realized there was something very important to what she was saying. When I finally stopped living in my expectation, I heard her and I was able to eke out, “I am sorry!” Years later, we would have a very similar conversation. This time the conversation was even more critical and even more direct, but it ended elegantly. All my children at one time or another have told me that one of the best things they remember from their childhood was when “dad” would admit he was wrong.

As my children grew older, I learned some of my expectations were unrealistic. But, even when my expectations were realistic and achievable, my children sometimes missed the mark. When I adopted a more Christlike attitude, I found I had more compassion for them (not more anger toward them). If I can grow into that, I am sure God is already like that.

When I adopted a more Christlike attitude, I found that I had more compassion for them (not more anger toward them). If I can grow into that, I am sure God is already like that.

Parenting scared me to death. Early on, when I was searching for tips on being a good father, I found this verse, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.” I read books, listened to speakers, and digested all sorts of advice from people. But nothing seemed as appropriate as this one single verse. I knew this because I had been provoked by adults in my own life. I knew how it affected me and I did not want to make the same mistakes with my children. It was a certainty that they would be angry at me at times, but there was no need for me to provoke them unnecessarily.

Since I had no idea how to be a good father, I defaulted to this rule often. I tried to ask myself, “Is this going to frustrate my children?” If it is going to frustrate them, then is it worth doing? Laura would often remind me of this rule, and I applied it when Lily and I “discussed” things and I am sure I will apply it to my relationship with my grandchildren. Children will be frustrated enough when they challenge authority and go through the process of maturing and growing in their understanding. Obviously, wisdom is involved, but sometimes it is wise to say nothing.

The lingering question in my mind is, “Why would God set up a system that is doomed from the start?” Why would he give us an unreachable goal and then be out-of-his-mind angry about the fact that we cannot reach it?

The lingering question in my mind is, “Why would God set up a system that is doomed from the start?” Why would he give us an unreachable goal and then be out-of-his-mind angry about the fact when we cannot reach it? That would be more like me at my worst than like God who is supposed to be the best. I have seen little league parents scar their children with words. God is not like parents with unrealistic expectations. I remembered Jesus at his baptism and transfiguration when the Father said, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” I do not think this is because of Jesus’ performance—I think it is because of the decision the Father makes to delight in and love the Son. It is the natural disposition of the trinity. God is love—God is patient—God is kind.

God is better than me.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Reflect on the statements below. Don't overthink it, just let it flow. You can analyze it later.

1. Describe some images you once had about yourself that you now know are false.
2. What does your true self look like?
3. Which version of you are you most like?
4. Imagine seeing yourself as a baby or at a younger age.
 - What would you say to that version of you?
 - What would you do? Pick him/her up? Give them a kiss? Recite something?
5. What are several words that summarize your thoughts about this chapter or what is a quote you would like to remember?

GOD IS GOOD?

I saw a t-shirt today that included the words, “God is good.” If you have ever been to an evangelical church, you have heard the phrase there as well:

Pastor: “God is good!”

Congregation “All the time!”

Pastor: “And all the time...”

Congregation: “God is good!”

Even at a reserved church, you might hear some applause as the congregation looks around as if to say, “And we are pretty good too!” Warm thoughts of denominationalism, even patriotism, spread throughout the room as everyone thinks “It is good to be us...God is good, and God is for us!” In the past few months, I have heard the phrase a lot from church goers, typically after a hospital visit, surviving an illness, or making money. To put it simply, this was typically used at a time when things went the way the person wanted them to.

Now, when I hear the phrase, I am more apt to ask, “why” and “what motivates you to think that way?” I know I am not alone in thinking this. Did God reward me for something I did, or did I pray in exactly the right way? Can I get what I want from God? What if the person did not make it through the surgery? What if the diagnosis was cancer and not a miracle? Do we question God and ourselves when things do not go the way we want?

When our children were infants, they depended on us for everything. Recently, I watched my daughter take care of her son. It was exhausting to watch. Laura is very good about taking the load off my daughter—holding the baby and helping her when she is around—but I am still too mesmerized by the whole process to respond quick enough to help.

I notice some chemistry between our daughter and grandson, but mostly his affection is limited to his basic needs. Laura and I (mostly Laura) could make the hunger pains of our children go away or clean up the discomfort of a messy diaper or just put them in a warm, comfortable place to sleep. They could not verbalize it yet, but because we met their basic needs, mom and dad were “good!”

When our children were toddlers and small children, I was good because I could amuse them for brief periods of time with toys and funny faces. I was their ticket to the magical places like the park and the ice cream shop. Although they were learning to feed themselves, they still relied on me and trusted me to bring them food that tasted good and made them healthy. Laura and I were the trusted providers of sickness relief, and the official dispensers of “ouchie” comfort. Life was evolving, but the theme continued.

Even as teenagers, I received a similar response. In some ways, it got more pronounced because then they knew what they were doing. Chauffeuring teenage girls to various events was one of the most frightening things I have ever done. I was consistently afraid of saying the wrong thing (which was very easy to do) or being too silly. Nearly anything with teenage girls can “ruin their life.” Once when I asked, “How did I do?”, after taking her friends out for her birthday, she responded, “You did okay!”

What I heard from my daughter was “You are good.” What I could faintly hear from heaven was, “This is my beloved son.” This is just one of things that, as a parent, made me feel good and pathetic at the same time.

Their lives became less dependent on me, and occasionally they would humble themselves enough to come out of their bedroom to acknowledge me. Unfortunately, that was only when they needed to ask for money! If you are a young parent, let me assure you about the teenage years. There will be a few times your teenagers will admit you are “good!” The bad news is it will only be when they want money or the keys to the car. You will in fact be “the greatest,” but only for an instant. I have at times been acknowledged on Facebook by my teenage children, but I’m not sure it was worth it for what I had to go through to get the scraps of their thankfulness. It was more like manipulation.

There was a period where my children became adults and did not need me. I always dreamed that when they moved out on their own one day, they would write me letters to thank me for all the lessons I had taught them and the thousands of dollars I had “invested” in their education. I go get the mail every day now, the short walk to our mailbox is exhilarating. I feel a short spike of anticipation when the mail carrier comes. *Maybe this will be the day I find the letter I have been looking for.* The letter never comes, and I am left standing at the mailbox holding offers for life insurance and bills. My children are not the spontaneous note-writing type.

As they got a little older and more mature, my children did acknowledge in their own individual ways, that they thought we were “good” in their eyes. Since they are at least partially like me, it was not a big emotional event. Most of the time they say

it in the little things, moments of weakness when they slip up and let it be known that we were at least okay (good) in their eyes. It was not when we gave them something or let them do something or helped them get something they wanted--it was just because they took some reflection and recognized what was "good" about us was the relationship that somehow survived the middle school years (affectionately known as hell to any parent with a daughter).

And there it is, what's good about God is what's good about family—it is the relationship. In my mind, God is not just good when things go well, God is better when things are going the worst.

God is not just good when things go well, God is better when things are going the worst.

As a pastor, I listened to people pray for miracles and thank God for healings. Often, I would turn to see the medical professional that probably dedicated their life and might have worked hard all night to help this person silently slip out of the room. I wondered if they resented God for getting all the credit while they probably got all the blame when it went badly. Often, I want to say thanks to the medical community as I thank God for his relationship with me as I went through the thing that caused me to say, "God is good."

I think if we only point up to the sky when we score a touchdown, we are going to remain spiritual teenagers. If we shout "God is good" only when our bellies are full, our diapers are clean, and the Spiderman nightlight in our bedrooms keeps away the bad guys, we should probably admit we are still infants, still taking a bottle every now and then, and most of what we

accomplish is because daddy does it for us. Instead of looking around the church to congratulate ourselves we should realize we are all still wearing diapers and being fed spiritual milk. We still think God is good, but only when he loans us the car.

This past weekend, I had an unusually rich experience at something called Souljourners, which is training for being a spiritual director. In addition to learning how to listen to people (directing), we also experienced direction from the Benedictine Sisters who supervise the program. Sister Marcia is my spiritual director. She is wise, and patient and kind and occasionally offers some advice. On one occasion, she recommended a place she knew of nearby called the “International Forest of Friendship.”

This park has trees from every state in the union and several foreign countries. I walked along snapping pictures of trees from states I know people would be interested in. It was so relaxing and refreshing! I stopped several times just to reflect and meditate on the quiet beauty. The “good”ness of God was most evident there. Then, something happened. As I was snapping a few pictures and thinking about leaving, I dropped my phone and broke the screen. If you know me, you know how attached I am to my phone and how devastating this could possibly be. As I paced around, wondering how I could get my phone fixed, I noticed an opening in the forest. It was kind of a walkway leading down to a circular cul-de-sac in the trees. The horseshoe bench that stood at the end of walkway beckoned to me to sit under the canopy of fall leaves that occasionally dropped to kiss the earth.

I sat in the middle of the bench and pulled out my broken phone. I was able to navigate to YouTube and turn on a song

I had recently discovered. It was a song of prayer called “The Cherokee Morning Song.” I have grown to love the song, but it resonated so much more in the shadow of those trees. I felt rooted and grounded to the earth and I muttered to myself, “I am a part of this”, and I thought, “This is a part of me.” As my broken phone chanted “We n’ de ya ho” (I am of the Great Spirit), my soul felt a kinship to God’s creation. I thought, “This is truly good, and I am simply happy to be here.”

Later, when I listened to a spiritual director meticulously apply her 30 plus years of experience to people seeking wisdom and discernment, I thought “God is good.” When I saw people care for each other, it reminded me that God *is* good—but not because he made my path easier or gave me something which made me feel better. God is good--in relationship. An embrace more than a handout.

God is good when two people pray together in relationship—not just when it turns out the way they prayed. God is good when two people hold each other in turmoil—not just when the turmoil goes away. God is good because of and through relationship.

I have often wondered what my children say to their friends. Maybe they tell others, “Our parents are good”, and their friends say, “All the time...” I would guess probably not. Today, I do not need to go out and check the mail for a letter I know will not be there anymore. The bills and offers still come often enough. I do not need a letter now because I can feel in their hugs, “This is good!”

All the time, my children, all the time!

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Reflect on the statements below. Don't overthink it, just let it flow. You can analyze it later.

1. What does it say about us if we think God is only good when we get what we want?
2. What does it say about God if he randomly blesses or curses?
3. What are several words that summarize your thoughts about this chapter or what is a quote you would like to remember?

WHAT GOD IS LIKE

About the time my children entered high school, they began to have questions. Occasionally, they or one of their friends would pose a challenging question that was hard for me to answer. These inquiries and concerns were part of what motivated me to ask those same questions of myself. I am eternally grateful because, in a way, they helped launch me on this journey to find a more genuine view of God. The way I interacted with them changed my views about God, some of the things that I assumed about God did not align with my own parenting. I am not God, but, I thought, God must be better than me.

To this day, I am the first one up on Christmas morning. Laura had a certain methodical way of doing things and it made her crazy when I would wake up the children early. This would always throw a monkey wrench into Christmas mornings at the Forehand's because I wanted everyone to hurry up and open their gifts. My family of origin was somewhat poor, and we did not always get a lot of gifts at Christmas. The idea of another being out there dropping off gifts out of the goodness of his heart and rewarding me for being "good" was enticing. Like many people, I love Christmas and Santa Claus was an early reference point for many of my views of God.

Santa Claus pairs up with many of the traditional views of God. After all, Santa Claus is always watching us to see if we

have been good or bad. He keeps a list of all those things, checks it twice to see if we have been naughty or nice. I remember my mom reminding me, “Santa Claus is coming soon.” My mind made the connection, “So I better be good for goodness sake!”

I also grew up in a male dominated, authoritarian type of religion. The leaders usually believed in capital, corporal punishment. They had little sympathy for those who committed crimes or disobeyed the rules at home. I do not remember ever being abused, but I most likely attached this angry, retributive image I witnessed to God. I heard vengeful sermons like the retelling of Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, and made the connection that God is angry, vengeful, and must be appeased. This misperception can be understandable since much of the Old Testament was written in a period of human history where gods needed to be satisfied. The only logical face to put on God was the face of wrath—he could never quite be happy until he enacted some sort of violence. In this model, it is easy to put the face of Zeus onto God where God appears to be an imposing figure ready to hurl lightning bolts toward the earth at any time. Many of the stories of the Old Testament, if taken literally, seem to reinforce this image of God as Zeus-like and his temperament to be one of anger, retribution, and wrath.

In Bible college, I began to read the Bible for myself. When I studied the New Testament more intently, I discovered something interesting. I found evidence of a God that exhibited qualities of mercy, love, and forgiveness. This realization left me with questions and confusion. How could God be for loving my neighbor and still condone acts of genocide and slavery? Even penal substitutionary atonement still hints that God must perform some act of violence to appease his anger and it left

me wondering why the whole system was so retributory. Could God not just forgive us without having to hurt something or someone? I know that most evangelicals would say that God is so holy that he has to have a sacrifice to pay for it. But didn't several people, including Jesus, say that sacrifice was not really what God desired? At that time, I subdued my questions and found a way to excuse some of the things I did not understand for the sake of certainty. But I couldn't escape the question and I continued to wonder.

Could not God just forgive us without having to hurt something or someone?

After a certain age, my children stopped believing in Santa Claus. When I spoke of the mythical being, they would lean over to me and whisper, "You know Santa Claus is not real." Even though I stopped believing in Santa Claus, part of me wanted to retain this view of God as the eternal gift giver and the methodology that if I was good enough, I would receive good things, because I was acceptable.

This model began to break down when I had children. I noticed that often I would find myself in a situation where I had to withhold gifts from them even when they were good, and I needed to give them good things even when they did not deserve it. In short, there were more important principles than getting something periodically and being "nice" in order to win the favor of Jolly old Saint Nick.

I remember distinctly losing my temper a few times. I am mostly even-tempered, but occasionally I would lose it. I can still remember the look on the faces of Laura and our children when this would happen. I would always think the same thing, "This

is not accomplishing anything noble.” Laura and the children might have responded to my immediate demands, but I still did some damage that was going to take time to repair. This did not motivate them to be better people or teach them any substantial lesson, it just caused them to be afraid of me and to trust me a little less.

Every time this happened, it chipped away at my view of God as vengeful and angry. This was the worst disposition for me as a parent and it never produced positive results. I began to realize that getting my children to do what I wanted was not substantial unless their hearts and minds were changed. Fear, retribution, and anger are usually rooted in immaturity. They are incredibly effective, but for the wrong reasons, and they often leave residual damage. I began to lose faith in a God who looked like this. I began to see and understand that God was more like what I was learning in the New Testament.

Fear, retribution, and anger are usually rooted in immaturity.

I do not remember who instigated the discussions. Most often it was Laura saying, “Why not sit down and talk to him?” She was referring to my only son, Jordan. So, the discussion began something like this, “You have done this thing that upset us, and we really should lock you up in a dungeon, take away your stuff, and never let you out until it is time for you to graduate and leave for somewhere else, but I am going to give you another chance.” I would say this is grace and mercy and love because I loved him enough to give him something he did not deserve by not giving him what he did deserve. Do not get me wrong, this was not an everyday thing. I am far from perfect, but this seemed

to be much closer to Christ-like and a better image of God than one who is always ready to hurl a lightning bolt because they think I certainly deserve it. In this instance, my son was not nice—he had been naughty. But I was not Santa Claus or Zeus, I was his father.

This doesn't mean that there is never a time to be direct and even critical. Jesus was often direct with his rebukes of certain religious people. But to the most vulnerable, his primary expressions were that of grace and mercy and love. When someone was already burdened with guilt and shame, he didn't pile on.

With my children, I found anger and vengeance to be easy, and mercy, love and forgiveness to be much harder. I had to be much more deliberate to administer what I was discovering as a much better way.

So, what is God like?

The Bible says, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."¹ Jesus is exactly like God and God is exactly like Jesus. When you see Jesus, you see God. Jesus is the face of the Trinity. If we want to understand the God of the Old Testament, we must interpret it through the lens of Jesus.

Jesus is exactly like God and God is exactly like Jesus. When you see Jesus, you see God.

When we look at Jesus, we see the face of God. He turns conventional wisdom on its head with statements like: "Love your enemies;"² "Turn the other cheek;"³ "Father forgive them."⁴ This was as surprising to first-century Jews as it is to us today. As followers of Jesus we can trust the image that he gave us. This image of God's nature helps us to more responsibly evaluate the much

older text of the Old Testament. His sermons, like the Sermon on Mount, give us guiding principles to apply to what we read and hear elsewhere. When we do this, we lose the need to force the Bible to do things it was never intended to do. In this way, we can give up some of the old notions we have about God, because Jesus clearly demonstrates what God is like. We do not have to demote the teachings of Jesus because we are trying to justify other passages. Jesus is the lens I need to use to view God by.

At this point in my life, it is enough for me to say the writers of the Old Testament recorded what they remember in the way that made sense to them. We do not have to force the Old Testament to be an accurate history book. We also do not have to lose any hope because we have less certainty about the details in certain stories—some are stories to teach lessons or amplify truth. They do not have to be accurate to be true. For me, this strengthens my faith. I can have more assurance of things that are certain like the testimony about Jesus. And, I have more trust in the unfolding revelation that is the story of God's people in the Bible. All of it makes sense through the lens of Jesus.

Raising children helped me understand what God is like. If God is like Santa Claus, then just like the mythical being, we lose interest when we do not get what we want, or when we do not feel like we can be good enough. If God is like Zeus, then God is ineffective at parenting us. He may get us to do things, but he'll never have our heart. But, if God is like Jesus then his mercy, love, and forgiveness can nurture a relationship that is fruitful. Like my children, we can all grow to be responsible humans who live productive, loving, and effective lives.

Now, I have an understanding of God that makes sense.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Reflect on the statements below. Don't overthink it, just let it flow. You can analyze it later.

1. What are your previous versions of God?
2. How are you beginning to see God?
3. What will it change about you to see God differently?
4. What are several words that summarize your thoughts about this chapter or what is a quote you would like to remember?

THE LOVE OF GOD

I can remember the drive home from the hospital, the first time we fumbled through getting the car seat out of the car (with our son still in it). All we really knew at that point was we were bonded to our first-born son in a way that was hard to explain. We placed him in the middle of the room. This bond beckoned us to do whatever we could to nurture him. We knew that we loved him and not much else. I remember looking at Laura and thinking, “*Okay...what do we do now?*”

There was a controversy when our second child, Abbey, was born. We had wondered whether she was male or female especially since I was in charge of the “guess the sex and arrival time of the baby” contest. The doctor was being a little secretive with the reveal, Laura nearly had an episode with him and he revealed in that moment our baby was a girl. I remember thinking about this daughter and saying to myself, “No one in this world has ever made me so angry yet still invoked my love like you do!” I loved her even when she challenged me—later, I respected her for it.

When our third child, Lily, was little she had the most beautiful hair. One time she cut it all off in the middle of night—I was devastated. She has always taken the road less traveled, like the time she delivered a challenging rebuke as Valedictorian in high school instead of the normal pablum often parroted by

high school students. I respected her for that, but I do not think I have ever loved and respected her more than these last few months as I have watched her meet every challenge of raising a child with developmental milestones from being born eight weeks early.

It goes without saying, I love my three children and have since they were born. I would go so far as to say that I loved them even before they were born. I would categorize this love as close to unconditional. There were times when I was frustrated with them. There were times when I doubted their love for me. They were normal teenagers and we went through all the struggles of parenting—but even when they were rebellious, it seemed to only draw me closer in my affections for them. I would say the only human who has loved them more unconditionally than me was Laura. Mothers seem to have the purest form of unconditional affection for their children; this love may even be stronger for their grandchildren.

The common denominator among all this is that, with very few exceptions and of those who were parents, they all loved their children.

As a pastor, I have seen people in all manner of circumstances. I have seen drug-addicted and/or alcoholic parents. I have seen criminal children and rebellious actions of all kinds. I have witnessed people with means and people in poverty. I have seen all sorts of religious zealots and those that claim they hate God. I have seen people I admired and people I had a hard time understanding. The common denominator among all this is, with very few exceptions of those who were parents, they all loved their children. They may not have known how to parent

effectively, making mistakes that led to perceptions of being bad parents; they may have scarred their children trying to be good parents; they may have been so frustrated with parenting that they wanted to give up. But, when I talked to each one personally, I could tell that there was nothing they loved more than their children. Most of them would even swear to be willing to die for their children.

One of my basic assumptions about God is that he is better than me. If he is not, then I have little need for him. Actually, I would still need him—I cannot breathe without his control, but his ineffectiveness would render him much less beneficial to me. If he is the same as me, or worse than me, he might even be a good friend, but he has no use to me as God. The scriptures were written by people who often portrayed God as a parent using the term Father. If God is Father and if he is love, then his love for his children must at least be better than the love I have for my children.

I know my children recognized my love at times. I would tell them I loved them, and they would say, “Yeah, but you have to love me because you are my dad.” They knew I said that I loved them, and they even had some evidence that I did, but they were not sure about my motives. Did I love them just because or was it because I was somehow being forced into it by God or something else?

We assume that God is doing something he does not want to do. If we assume that we are originally bad, and he cannot hardly stand to look at us, then it is almost like something or someone must talk him into loving us.

We often have a similar view of God's love. We assume that God is doing something he does not want to do. If we assume that we are originally bad, and he cannot hardly stand to look at us, then it is almost like something or someone must talk him into loving us. It is like the child that no one wants on their sports team. Someone urges, "Come on, he's not that bad—I'll vouch for him. Give him a chance." If we would be honest, this is how we often feel about God's love. We make incorrect assumptions about how we feel at the time or what someone else told us is true.

We inadvertently think God loves some and not others. On one hand, we sing and preach about God being love and God loving everyone, but then we imagine God has favorites among those he loves. We imagine our denomination or belief system being righter and God favoring us a little more. We imagine that our nation of origin is better than most or all others and we label others as evil or sub-human so that we can secretly imagine God smiting them and approve various forms of violence.

During the civil war, this played out in a very real way. The United States arrived at a place in history where a mother could realistically have a child on both sides of the war; both sides of the battle might claim, "God is on our side and they are the enemy!" Imagine the mother's thoughts as the battle raged. Would her love be any stronger for either of her children? Now imagine that God is looking down on the whole world. He sees religious battles over belief systems that are all at least partially wrong. He sees countries that have all different sorts of problems and all different sorts of feelings toward one another based on religion or possessions or just plain ignorance. He sees all the people that die on the battlefield and all those likely to be killed by collateral

damage. Just like the mother who saw two of her sons on the battlefield, God sees his children and he loves them all.

I have seen people live with the sad assumption that we give God a reason to love us. We imagine that we are somehow useful enough to be considered loveable to him. I admit I get trapped in this practice way too often. I was taught that I should do something for God because I have a duty. I unconsciously looked for approval that I did enough or did something significant enough that God would truly love me. It kept me with just enough shame to always need to be doing something for God. It is not that we doubt God loves us, we demote the intensity and permanence of his love.

God loves us because of who he is not because of anything we do. He is obligated by his nature alone to love us.

God loves us because of who he is not because of anything we do. He is obligated by his nature alone to love us. We understand this partially because our nature as parents drives us to love at least somewhat unconditionally. We get a sense of this other-centered, self-giving love when we watch our children raise their children. We see them love without expectation and without restraint. Just like a mother's love is free and unencumbered, the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit flows from their love for each other freely to us. It is their nature to be especially fond of us because it is not only what they do—it is who they are!

My children had different responses to my love at different times in their lives. Sometimes they would accept it, then ignore what I did or said. Other times, they would actively rebel and resist my love. Still at times, they might pretend like it was not

real. As a parent, my best move was to love them consistently even when they responded wrongly. Our response to God's love cannot change the nature of his affection for us, our response only changes our experience. Ted Dekker, in the *Forgotten Way*, says:

“What you believe about yourself never defines you; only what your Father believes about you truly defines you. Your beliefs and perceptions, however, do define the experience you have in this world.”¹

We are embraced by the love of God which cannot be separated from us. Our actions simply change the way his love feels, not the actual composition or expression of it. Repentance changes how we feel about God not how he feels about us. His love never changes, only the way we perceive it.

While I was still a young adult, I attended a small church for one Sunday. It was one of those “I should go to church” moments that turned out to be much more. As I sat in the pew after service, I remember being overwhelmed with how much God loved me. Even though I never returned to that church, the encounter there with my thoughts made a significant advance in my personal spiritual growth. My understanding of God's love had changed. I envisioned a love that could not be affected by any of the circumstances of my life. I somehow felt a love that could not be affected by me but could be accepted and appreciated by me. It was a reference point for the future. God...loves...me...period.

The moments when my children realized my love for them came more in subtlety than grand moments. It was a little look they gave or something in their hugs that told me they got it! As much as possible, my love for my children remained constant, but when their understanding of my love changed, then their

experience also changed. God's affection for us is the most constant thing in the universe. May we come to know it more fully!

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Reflect on the statements below. Don't overthink it, just let it flow. You can analyze it later.

1. What does it mean that God loves you?
2. When you think of the love of God, what are some things that cannot co-exist with love?
3. Look at 1 Corinthians 13. If God is love, then what other words or phrases describe God and what he does? For example, "God (love) *keeps no record of wrong*" (1 Cor. 13:5)? What does it say that God (love) does not do or is not?
4. What are several words that summarize your thoughts about this chapter or what is a quote you would like to remember?

ENDNOTES

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For more information about Karl Forehand
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*“Karl Forehand is a pastor and seeker who has been on a profound spiritual journey—a journey that led him away from narrow, judgmental fundamentalism into the deep, gracious richness of the kingdom of Christ. I call this the water to wine journey. Karl’s journey has not been without pain, but it has been beautiful. In *Apparent Faith*, Karl tells his deeply personal story of seeking and finding the pearl of great price. I am sure this poignant book will resonate with many readers.”*

—BRIAN ZAHND, LEAD PASTOR OF WORD OF LIFE CHURCH IN ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI AND AUTHOR OF *WATER TO WINE*

*“For better or worse, many of us form our image of God from our relationship with our earthly father. In *Apparent Faith*, Karl Forehand makes a heartwarming and compelling case that God reveals just as much of Himself in and through our relationships with our own children—pointing us to a love without limits and hope without end. This book will help you discover the Father we all long for; subtly hidden within so many of the relationships of life.”*

—JASON ELAM, HOST OF THE *MESSY SPIRITUALITY* PODCAST

“This book gripped me, pulling emotions from me in the best ways. Karl, like so many of us, has leaned into Jesus and found something so beautiful and worth following—seeing beauty in both light and dark places.”

—SETH PRICE, HOST OF *CAN I SAY THIS AT CHURCH* PODCAST



Karl J. Forehand was a bi-vocational pastor for 20 years until he suddenly realized that some things in his journey of faith needed to be reevaluated. He is the founder of Karl’s Coaching which endeavors to help people close the gaps in their life and find wholeness in body, soul, and spirit. He has training in spiritual leadership coaching, plant-based nutrition, and spiritual direction. He lives in Missouri with his wife Laura and dog Winston. He has three grown children and two grandchildren.



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