





## Introduction

# Just When You Thought Your Work Was Done . . .

*“The hardest part of raising a child is teaching them to ride bicycles. A shaky child on a bicycle for the first time needs both support and freedom. The realization that this is what the child will always need, can hit hard.”*

—SLOAN WILSON, NOVELIST

I held my little one in my arms, and my husband set the suitcase down and curled up next to us on the bed as we shared our first few moments at home together as a family. We couldn't stop smiling as we looked at that innocent, perfectly formed little person and then into each other's eyes. We had a new identity.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, Dad.”

While our son lay there quietly, nestled among the pillows and surrounded by his proud parents, we dreamed about the future that was ahead for our new little family. Our thoughts bounced back and forth from excitement to fear, from confidence to uncertainty. We vowed to do our best as caregivers, protectors, guides, providers, defenders, and teachers. Parents.

“Can we really do this? Are we ready?” I wondered if I could

measure up to all the books I had read and examples I had seen about how to be a great mother. My husband gently took my hand and offered assurance: “Nancy, we’ll be fine. God gave him to us, and if we stay close together and listen to Him, He’ll help us be the best parents we can be.”

Sound familiar? If you are a parent of grown children like us, you probably had that same experience as you took on the role of raising a child. When we all cradled our newborns in our arms those many years ago, we envisioned spending eighteen years or so training our children in the way they should go and then launching them off into adulthood. We assumed we would complete our parental tasks and face the “empty nest.”

The pages on the calendar seemed to turn quickly, and before we knew it we watched our children blow out eighteen candles on a birthday cake. As we celebrated this milestone in their lives, our minds drifted back to our own graduation from teenager to adult. For many of us, the ink was barely dry on our diploma when we heard the good-byes and well-wishes from family and friends. Some with tear-filled eyes and others with sighs of relief. Armed with a set of luggage, the old family car, warnings from Dad, and a care package from Mom, we headed out the door and into our future.

Whatever the circumstances, whether off to college, away to the military, or out to find a job and our own apartment, we left our childhood behind and flung open the door to adulthood. Ready or not, there we were—officially on our own. We now held our future in our hands as we stepped out into the world to make our mark.

As we brought our own children to this threshold of adulthood, we assumed they would follow a path of independence and self-sufficiency similar to ours. We started taking steps to prepare ourselves—and them—for the time when we would let go and watch them fly off on their own.

To soften our grief, we began to dream and plan for life after the children were out of the nest. Travel. New careers. Fewer financial

obligations. Remodeling. Free time to enjoy our hobbies and interests. There would be tears of sadness from one eye and tears of joy from the other as we set aside the role we had carried: parents raising children.

Then the long-awaited, much anticipated day came and we realized the expectation of closing the chapter on parenthood was only a myth. The reality? Parenting doesn't stop when our children grow up. And the nest doesn't always empty when or how we thought it would. Our children may or may not be sleeping under our roof. But regardless, our sense of responsibility continues as we search for understanding about this new identity: parents of adult children.

## Now That They're Grown

A large percentage of our adult children ages eighteen to early thirties and even beyond—sometimes referred to as Generation-Xers, adulescents, twenty-somethings, and emerging adults—are successfully stepping out into their new roles as adults. They have taken the necessary steps to prepare and are now creating a new life for themselves both personally and professionally. They are buying homes, managing their own finances, traveling, building new relationships, perhaps starting families of their own. They speak to us about their goals and passions along with their commitment and determination to seize all life has to offer. As parents, we stand on the sidelines and cheer as we wonder how we fit into this new picture, praying God will guide their steps along His plan for their lives.

Some of our adult children, however, are not in as much hurry to leave home. Others go but come back after graduation from college or a failed relationship. There are those who can't find a job, perhaps due to increasing competition in the marketplace. Some find a job, but not the ideal job of their dreams or one that will adequately cover their expenses. Many seem to be slower in

growing up and reaching a level of maturity to take charge of their future with confidence and responsibility.

Our children say they do care about their futures, but some wrestle to know how to make the dream of success become reality. As a result, many of them struggle with significant anxiety, pressure, and uncertainty. Even if they don't automatically turn to us for support, we want to do what we can to help.

## Our Changing Role

No matter where they are on this journey into adulthood, we may find our adult children looking to us for insight, counsel, mentoring, and encouragement. They want to relate to us—adult to adult. We need to be ready and willing to make that shift with them. Whether or not we agree with the life choices they make, our responses to

those choices can significantly affect their lives and our relationships with them. That's where our insecurities as parents may come to the surface.

One size *doesn't* fit all when it comes to parenting our adult children.

Jane, a mom of a young adult, described it so clearly: "I'm struggling to find my place in my child's life right now. I find myself guessing a lot about the right way

to help. I don't know how to step back yet stay connected. It's an awkward time for both of us."

Another bewildered mom captured the frustration we often feel as parents: "I know there's a time to speak and a time to keep silent. I just don't know which to do when!"

Today's parents may have dreams of their own for launching their children out of the nest and into adulthood, but we now recognize that one size *doesn't* fit all when it comes to parenting our adult children. We need to respond to each one individually as we evaluate their readiness to move into this new phase of life. Indeed, it's not

just about the number of candles on the cake. We should consider their needs—emotional, physical, financial, educational, spiritual, and social—as we determine how to support them and cultivate a new relationship: adult to adult.

It's also important to evaluate our own definition of successful parenting. Author Stephen Bly contends that our success as parents "is not determined by [our children's] economic good fortune, scholastic achievements, social popularity, or how rapidly or slowly children pull away from their parents. . . . Successful parenting means you have helped your children become the persons God wants them to be."<sup>1</sup>

The question is not *if* we will be concerned. We love our children and will always be vested in their well-being. They may not be physically living at home, but we do see them as still in our emotional "family nest." Our challenge? To determine how we will channel our concern in ways that will support and encourage them to develop both self-sufficiency and a positive connection with family.

Our first step is to set aside our preconceived ideas and seek God's wisdom to understand our own children individually. We should ask questions and listen when they speak. They want to know we are behind them as they move into the role of adulthood. Our support coupled with their movement. We need to talk *with* them (not *at* them) as they develop their life plans and share from the wisdom of our experience. But it's important to acknowledge that it is their unique future they are creating, not our history for them to copy automatically.

We need to pray for them and with them. There may be fences to mend. We need to set boundaries while maintaining a connection as

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family. Our children long to know we love them—unconditionally. We need to be their strongest cheerleaders, celebrating their victories and supporting them through the struggles of life. We need to communicate openly, honestly, and respectfully, even when we disagree with their choices.

Just as we encourage them to take care of themselves to the best of their ability—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—we must do the same for our marriages and ourselves. We also face significant life changes, many similar to those of our adult children. We are closing the chapter on childhood activities we shared with them and now developing new interests, even new relationships. Many of us are contemplating career changes. Finances are taking a priority focus as we consider our current needs and look ahead to retirement. Some parents are dealing with relocation issues as they make plans to downsize into a new living space. Whatever your plans may be, know that changes are on their way.

## About This Book

As parents of adult children, we are facing a variety of challenges as we negotiate our way through this passage of our lives. In the chapters ahead, we'll hear insight, encouragement, and strategies—*secrets*—for responding, from both parents and young adults. Several of them have shared from their personal experiences, and out of respect to their families, we have changed names and some details to protect their privacy. Marriage and family experts will also step in to offer wise counsel. At the close of each chapter, we will pause for you to reflect on your own personal story and consider how you will respond to the opportunities and challenges before you. You may want to join other parents to read and discuss the book together.

As the mother of two adult sons, my parenting world was male-oriented. That is, until one of my sons married a wonderful young

woman. I've talked with many mothers who have raised daughters and we've discovered we share many joys and challenges in common. I refer to "he" throughout the book rather than "he/she" for brevity. Let your mind translate to your own parenting language as you consider the stories shared and apply the truths to your own life experiences.

For us, and our children, it is the dawn of a new day, time to begin another chapter in the relationship we are continually building with them. What will be reflected on the pages of our family's history? The days ahead will write the answer. The health and well-being of a relationship is dependent on each person's dedication and contribution to it. We cannot control how our children will respond to this changing relationship now that they have stepped into an adult role. They are responsible for their own choices.

However, we do know this truth: The opportunity is ours to seek God's guidance in order to contribute our best offering as parents to our children. It is our calling and it is our blessing. And it will be an integral part of the legacy we leave for generations to come.

Join me in the pages ahead as we consider together how to contribute our very best as parents toward building a healthy relationship with our adult children . . . now that they're grown.

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## Chapter One

# Step One: Know What You're Getting Into

*"To bring up a child in the way he should go,  
travel that way yourself once in a while."*

—JOSH BILLINGS, HUMORIST

Now that my son has finished his training, he is focused on building his own life and establishing himself. He wants to be totally independent and determined to make his own choices. I'm not quite sure how to relate to him now. How do I give the support I think he still needs while respecting his freedom and not meddling?

My daughter just graduated from college and wants to move back home. I thought she'd be getting a job and going on with her life, but she says she's not ready. I think she's afraid she can't make it, but that just doesn't seem like her. She's smart and has a lot of friends. You'd think she would want to get out and on her own. I don't understand.

My son is struggling with some choices I don't approve of. We've not always had the best relationship, and I don't want to

push him away, but whenever I bring it up, he gets mad. When is he going to grow up and learn to do the right thing?

We've raised three children. The older two are on their own and doing great; but the youngest is in his mid-twenties and still at home. He has no ambition and says he doesn't know what he wants to do with his life. I think he's lazy. He should have a plan and be out on his own by now. His older brothers were by his age. I just don't get it.

I'm worried. My daughter seems to be very depressed but won't get help. She's in her late twenties, and this should be the most exciting time of life for her. I don't know what's wrong. What can I do?

As a counselor and life coach, I often hear cries for help like these from parents of adult children. Many are perplexed, unsure of what they are experiencing themselves, and feel clueless about their children's desires and needs. They describe a breakdown somewhere in their relationship with their children, and they are searching for tools to fix what seems to have fallen apart. Some come with a sense of anxiety, fearful of what may happen in the days ahead and feeling unprepared to respond. The problems may differ in scope, but there are some common denominators—concern about the child's situation coupled with a sense of urgency to restore, repair, or protect the relationship.

What do we do when we want to solve a problem or prevent one from occurring? When our car is not running properly, we don't simply pick up tools and start adjusting parts randomly. We must first understand how the car operates and what is needed for it to run properly. Then we can identify what the problem is and how to address it.

Our relationships with our adult children are no different. We must begin by understanding what life is like for them so we'll know

what to expect and how to respond as challenges arise. Equipped with insight and empathy woven together with wisdom from the Lord, we'll know how to parent our adult children effectively.

## Identifying Their Challenges

Young adults are dealing with the major developmental task of establishing their identity in today's society. They are looking in the mirror and realizing, "I'm not a kid anymore. So who am I now as an adult? And what is that supposed to look like?"

These young adults are ready to let go of the expectations, pressures, and limitations of adolescence to enjoy the freedom of independence as an adult. They see before them a blank canvas and a palette filled with a vast array of colors.

The paintbrush is in their hands, and they can now begin to create the picture their minds have dreamed of and their hearts have longed for during those turbulent teen years.

While they may have an idea of the type of masterpiece they want to create, they may

not know how or where to begin. They do know, however, that they want it to be their own work of art and not simply a re-creation of their parents' life pictures.

It's not that they necessarily dislike or want to abandon their parents completely. It is important to them, however, to create their own identity. They want to establish their own value system and perspectives on life—apart from those of their parents. While at times this may seem to parents as if their adult children are disregarding their views and dismissing their advice, in fact, this declaration of independence is an important developmental stage. Our children now must learn how to make their own decisions, solve their own problems, and deal with the consequences of their choices.



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own identity.



Psychologists Lois and Joel Davitz identify this as a tense time as these young adults sort out many things about themselves:

There's tension, but that makes sense. Having just taken a giant step from the shelter of the teen years onto the ladder of adulthood, their footing is far from secure. In fact, it's downright shaky. In their favor, however, is the buoyancy of youth, the belief in being invulnerable, and the prospect of endless tomorrows. . . . For the teen turned twenty, it is a brave new world to be discovered and experienced to the fullest.<sup>1</sup>

We watch as many of these new adults set goals, follow through on preparation and training, then step out boldly into the marketplace. They are determined to establish a strong foundation as they begin to climb that ladder toward success. They are intent on creating a positive identity, both professionally and personally.

While some adult children long for the day when they can be totally independent, they choose to remain at home and continue receiving their parents' assistance until they complete their plans and are ready to successfully move out on their own. They have a focus, goals, and intentions; and they look to their parents to help get them solidly on their feet. However, others have difficulty finding the confidence to step out on their own. They may lack a sense of direction of where or how to move forward with life. Or they may struggle with life challenges and question their ability to make it on their own. Emotional maturity develops at differing paces and through differing life experiences for our children as they transition from childhood to adulthood. Whatever their challenges may be, home offers safety and security.

Statistics on today's young adults indicate many struggle to cope with the challenges of adulthood. Psychologist Dr. Jane Adams identifies indicators of the problems our adult children have in adjusting:

- Twenty-eight percent of 21-year-olds have downsized the ambitions they had for themselves at [age] 18, and 50 percent of persons [ages] 21 to 30 believe their goals will never be accomplished.
- Fifty-eight percent of 21- to 24-year-olds live at home or have boomeranged back in the last two years; for 25- to 34-year-olds, the figure is 34 percent.
- Independent adulthood is achieved five to seven years later by young adults than it was in 1960.
- Forty percent of young adults [ages] 18 to 35 are excessively dependent on their parents for financial, emotional, and physical support.
- Over half the parents of 21- to 32-year-olds contribute a quarter or more to the income of their grown children, in money, goods, and services.<sup>2</sup>

We read statistics such as these, make a comment or two, and then go on about our day—unless those statistics are found within our own family relationships. Then we come face-to-face with reality. It is more than just facts and figures. In my counseling office, in my ties with friends and family, and in my own life as a parent, I see the reality of these statistics as young adult children and their parents work to push past the anxiety, confusion, frustrations, and broken hearts.

## Young Adults Speak Out

If we really want to understand our adult children, we must listen to them with our minds and our hearts as they share their dreams and goals as well as their disappointments and concerns. They communicate much, through both their words and their silence.



I don't know what I want to do with my life.

There are so many decisions I have to make and so many choices. I wish someone would just tell me what to do. I used to say I wanted to make up my own mind but I need some help figuring it all out.

I live on my own with a roommate, but my parents still try to meddle in my life a lot. They call too much, drop by unannounced, and ask too many questions. They are always telling me what to do and don't listen to me. Then they get mad if I don't follow their advice. I love them but it's hard to handle that.

Living at home is hard for me. My parents still treat me as they did when I was in high school and don't see me as an adult. We fight a lot.

My parents give me money if I need something, but they don't have much time for me. I wish they would call sometimes, at least once a week. I'm sure they care, in their own way. I could just use the support right now. I really feel alone.

I know I'm twenty-four years old and should be out on my own, but I'm not sure I can make it without my parents around. I think life is hard.

I have a lot of decisions to make and don't feel I can go to my parents for advice. They told me once I got out of college I would have to make it on my own. I don't want them to think I'm a failure.

I thought when I graduated from college, I would land a great job making good money, but that's a lot harder than I expected. I'm living back at home and working at my dad's store until I find the right job.

I think I know what I want to do with my life, but my parents don't agree. I feel pressured that if I don't follow their plan, they won't support me. I feel stuck.

I've always heard this was supposed to be the best time of my life, and I couldn't wait. Now that I'm in my mid-twenties, I think life is harder. I'm about to graduate and be on my own. My parents tell me it's all up to me now, but I'm afraid of making wrong choices that will ruin my life. I'm not sure I'm ready.

My biggest challenges right now are getting back to church, furthering my career, and doing the right things.

Being a single adult woman is hard in today's times, making it on my own, getting my career going, and keeping myself safe.

## Our Search for Understanding

As parents, we think we know our children well. After all, we gave birth to them and have been with them throughout their lives. We've seen them at their best, and we've witnessed them at their worst. We assume we know what makes them happy and what frustrates them. We think we know just what they are encountering at this stage of their lives. We reflect back on our own experiences, remembering how we stepped into our role as an adult, and we expect the same or more from our children. "When I was their age . . ." our thoughts begin, ending with, "So why can't they . . . ?"

There are, indeed, some similar challenges between our entry into adulthood and that of our children. Yet we may not always see the challenges and opportunities unique to today's young adults or remember some of the struggles we experienced as we took those first adult steps. As a result, many parents are frustrated with the actions or inactions of their adult children. They become irritated

when their children won't consider their advice, follow their direction, or act in the manner they expect. They may see their children as selfish, immature, lazy, or rebellious, and they lash out in despair, "Now that you are an adult, act like one!"

Parents are looking for responsibility, independence, focus, and direction—indicators of adult maturity. However, their expectations may or may not be reasonable for their individual child. And their child may or may not share those same goals and expectations.

## Moms Share Their Concerns

As we have identified, many of today's young adults are struggling with this new identity, which makes parents like Annette very anxious. "I see my daughter as wanting too much, too fast. She's a hard worker and will always justify that she can just 'work harder' to have the house, the cars, and the furniture. But I can see that she's growing weary—working a lot of overtime to pay for all of the 'things' she's acquired. She wants to have a baby in the next year or so, but finances might be an issue. I do notice that (as she grows more interested in having children) she's becoming closer to me, talking about 'girl things' more, etc. I enjoy these times with her. I imagine that when the babies start coming, we'll really come to understand what the word *challenges* means!"

Another mom has noticed the changes in her youngest daughter now that the older children have moved away. "I think she feels the burden of taking care of me, since I am adjusting to my older daughters being out of the house and establishing themselves as married young women. She checks on me a lot. I think she also may feel pressure to get engaged, since she is the last one of the girls."

"Finances are a big struggle for my son," notes the mom of a young man in his mid-twenties. "He wants to get married, but I don't know how he'll support a wife when he can barely make it himself."

In reflecting on her son's recent graduation from college, one mom made this observation: "When James was a little boy, he was so easygoing and laid back . . . not a stubborn bone in his body. He just wanted to enjoy life. Now that he is an adult, he may be too easygoing. While he's still intent on enjoying life, he doesn't seem to be in a hurry to get out on his own and on with his life. I wish he had a stronger sense of drive."

Carol, the mother of three adult sons in the military, sees the unique challenges many young adults are facing in transitioning from life in the military to civilian status. "One of my boys will discharge from the military this year and will face some significant adjustments to civilian life. He may need to move back home for a while, and that will involve adjustments for all of us."

Sometimes parents like Kim have broken hearts as they see their adult children in troubling life circumstances. "My daughter is married to a man who drinks too much and is very argumentative. She seems to be withdrawing into herself. I'm worried for her and for her baby."

Health problems, including mental health challenges such as depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and eating disorders, sometimes surface in young adults as they face increasing life pressures. One mom describes the turmoil she witnesses in the life of her daughter trying to establish her independence while struggling with significant problems. "Our daughter has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and has not been able to keep a steady job. She lived with us for a while after a divorce until she felt like she was ready to move back out on her own. She got herself set up with a new job and an apartment, determined to make it on her own. However, she has lost that job and is once again struggling financially. We just don't know what will happen next and how we should respond. It is a troubling pattern for all of us."

I recently sat with the mother of a twenty-year-old cancer survivor as her son prepared for surgery. With a heavy heart, she shared

her burden for her son and the sadness she felt as she watched him deal with the challenges of this disease and its limitations on a significant time in his life. The protective side of her longs to step in and take charge of his care and his choices, while the understanding side of her realizes that as an adult, he can now make these important decisions on his own as he deals with life one day at a time. Heavy responsibilities for a young man just learning to embrace the role of an adult.

## The Challenge for Parents

While the stories from these parents do identify some troubling challenges for our children, others relate the excitement and anticipation they feel as they watch their children begin a new chapter in life. Yet with that expectancy also come the uncertainties of how the future will unfold and what role parents are to play in the lives of their adult children. This is most evident when young adults don't move in the direction or at the speed parents deem appropriate in assuming their role and responsibilities as adults.

Whether or not they realize it, a sense of urgency may cause parents to push their adult children toward some type of action, even if it is not the best one for the child.

Then there are parents who approach their adult children with the perspective that "If I could make it on my own successfully, so can you." When their children reach a certain age or life event (typically eighteen, or just after graduation from high school or college), they step back from the support role. They do so whether or not their children are prepared and ready to assume all the responsibilities that come with being an independent adult. They take the "sink or swim" approach as their children jump off into the waters of adulthood, assuming they will learn best by figuring things out through trial and error as they go along. As a result, their children must take full care of themselves, ready or not.

Then there's another group of parents who view this turning point in their child's life in comparison to their own, but take a much different approach. They remember the struggles and challenges they encountered as they stepped into the role of adulthood and don't want their children to struggle. They want to give them more than what they had, so they take an active role in their children's lives, sometimes to the point of not letting go.

From their mouths, you'll hear phrases like, "Whatever you need, just ask and I'll make sure you have it." Or, "Take all the time you need to decide what you want to do. We'll take care of everything for you." There are those who believe they know what is best for their children's future and take a directive role in their children's choices. "We want you to be successful, so you need to listen to us and take our advice."

While there may be those days and circumstances that prompt us to want to walk away from our role, we know that we became parents the first time we took our children into our arms and we will remain in that role throughout our lives. Beyond the hurts, the confusion, and the uncertainties, there is a desire in the quiet places of our hearts to lovingly support our children. Our challenge is to discern how to offer support that is healthy both for our children and for ourselves.

## Practical Tips for Parents

Understanding our adult children is the first step, *a critical step*, along this journey of parenting. It begins by viewing them—each one independently—as the unique individuals God created. He instilled in each one the capacity to love and be loved. He gave each one talent and abilities, strengths and limitations, and He has a plan for each of their lives. We need to set aside our own plans and dreams for our children's lives so we can be open to learn about theirs. We need to watch, listen, and ask questions as we

learn about life from their perspectives. And we need to pray for them, asking God to show our children the plans He has for them. Perhaps that's one of the most difficult and yet most freeing tasks we have as parents—to let go of our sense of control and trust God to guide. As we do so, our children can then sense both the freedom and responsibility to take charge of their lives, knowing God is there to guide and we are alongside them with our love and support.

As we talk with them about their dreams and goals, we must be mindful that they are in a time of exploration and they don't necessarily have their futures all mapped out as we would hope. We need to respect the stress they are working through as they consider possibilities before them, and we must remember that the challenges they face today are not necessarily the same as those we encountered at their age. We must fight the urge to say, "I know just how you feel, so this is what you need to do."

It's also important to avoid minimizing their struggles or overreacting to their stresses. We need to acknowledge their concerns without a barrage of commentary and offer our confidence in their ability to successfully work through their challenges.

As we talk with them, we must be careful to withhold comments that may appear judgmental and avoid comparisons with other children—their siblings, their friends, our friends' children. Again, keep in mind that each person is unique and must find their own individual measure of success as they choose the path they will follow.

Remember, the goal in this type of conversation is to gather information so we can better understand our children before deciding how to respond in a way that respects the relationship. That means we must *listen*—with our mind and our heart—as they share their perspectives, their needs, their concerns, their hopes, and their dreams. In the following chapter, we'll talk more

about how to communicate effectively and support our children as they work through the challenges, choices, and changes they are encountering.

It's important that we foster a spirit of hopefulness in ourselves and in them.

Our responsibility—to God and to our children—is to meet them where they are and to recognize the talents and abilities He has instilled in them, as well as the challenges they are facing. It's important that we foster a spirit of hopefulness in ourselves and in them. Then we can learn how to express our love and offer

our insight and encouragement in meaningful, supportive ways as they travel this journey into adulthood.

### *On a Personal Note*

Reflect back to your own life experiences as a young adult.

How was life in our society different/similar to today?

What challenges did you face?

What opportunities were available to you?

What helpful support did you receive from your parents or other adults?

Think about each of your adult children—individually.

What do you observe in their lives right now—both opportunities and challenges?

What are they communicating/not communicating to you?

Find a time to talk with your adult children, one to one. Express both your intent to understand their desires and their needs and your commitment to learn how to support them effectively as you learn how to parent an adult. Then listen. Just listen.

Pray for God's wisdom as you seek to understand life for your adult children and for His guidance and protection of them as they begin this new chapter in their lives.

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Excerpt provided courtesy of Bethany House and author Nancy Williams.  
For more information about the book, visit [http://www.nancywilliams.net!](http://www.nancywilliams.net)