

The Empty Nest

This morning I say good-bye to our youngest child as he begins his junior year of college. Sean is the youngest of our four, preceded in these good-byes (in ascending chronological order) are Jonathan, Juliana and Heather. The older three have married well and presented us with one son each, giving us a grand total so far of three grandsons. Today I fly on a speaking mission to Washington to be in conference in a lovely town on the Puget Sound called Port Orchard. When I return, the youngest will have “flown the nest.” My heart and prayers will be with all our kids as I minister the Word in Washington. One child lives in South Carolina, another in Ohio, another in Florida, and we still have one in Texas, although in another town. We asked God to bless and use our kids and I sometimes humorously say, I just forgot to specify Houston! How do Barbara and I adjust to an emptying nest?

1. We prepared for this day long before it came.

I don't want to be a needy parent making our children feel guilty with going on with the rest of their lives. I have seen far too many clinging dads and moms who refuse to say good-bye. The Word of God is clear, spoken by the Lord Jesus Himself when He said, *"And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?"* (Matthew 19:5). Children will have a difficult time in their future “cleaving,” if we are not able to allow them the transitional “leaving.”

I'll never forget hearing a story by my pastor, who was just beginning to experience the empty nest. He was getting on an airplane and watched as Dr. John R. Rice said good-bye to one of his married daughters. After giving a warm hug and kind words, Dr. Rice sat down on the plane next to our pastor, picked up a newspaper and began to casually read. Dr. Hyles then asked Dr. Rice, “How do you do that?” “Do what?” Dr. Rice inquired. “Say good-bye to your daughter and without wiping a tear, sit down and begin to read!” Dr. Hyles exclaimed. Dr. Rice took off his glasses, smiled at his old friend and said, “Dr. Hyles, the day she was born, her mother and I knew this day was coming; it did not catch us by surprise. We prepared then for this day now.”

This was a wise piece of council because if we prepare now for that day then, it will help in a number of areas. It will help us appreciate the time now and be less likely to squander the time God has granted to us. Also, it will aid us to guide our children in the fine art of living with a spouse in the future. It is a time of teaching unselfishness, godliness, and decision making. *"Train up a child in the way he should go..."* (Proverbs 22:6). When interpreting this verse, perhaps we should be reminded that they will “go.” Let us prepare now for the inevitable.

2. Good-bye is not permanent.

In just a few days, Barbara and our married daughters will be together in Chicago for the marriage of a nephew. Already they are looking forward to being together. We are also looking forward to a preaching engagement I have in Florida in the very near future, where we shall see our son and family. And even sooner we shall be making some final deliveries to the campus of Baylor University for the youngest. So, as you can see our good-bye is more like “see you later!”

This will also prepare us for the time we must say so long when we take the trip to Heaven. *"For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us"* (Romans 8:18). Looking back, I see Dad following me to the door and wishing us well. Then after marriage after Dad and Mom would come visit us, we would walk them to the door wishing them well. Sixteen years ago, I followed Dad to the door of death, but I am comforted in knowing that it was not permanent. *"For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens"* (II Corinthians 5:1).

3. I like my wife.

This usage of the verb “like” may not seem to be the best; you may rather use the word “love.” In Christian vocabulary, love is a given. Why, we are even commanded to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44)! Not everybody who loves someone else necessarily likes that someone else. I love and I also like my wife. So for us the empty nest brings us back to our earlier childless years of marriage, which was not bad then and even better now. There is much for a young couple to adjust to in the early years. Now in these later years there are not as many surprises. Sometimes I almost sense that we can read each other’s minds. It is a good time. This is a time when we need each other. If I get down, she picks me up and if she gets down, I pray for her, because I am usually not up from a down as quickly as she is. *"Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up"* (Ecclesiastes 4:9, 10).

For young married couples with kids, I caution you not to build your life around the kids to the neglect of your spouse. Remember, you had each other before they ever came along, and at the risk of sounding too simplistic, they would not have come along if you had not had each other. And remember also, the greatest thing you can do for your kids is love their mother or father! This also teaches children how to be happy after they leave. Give them the impression marriage is fun, full of love and adventure. And should there be a person reading this right now who says to themselves, “Yeah, right!” I would ask you this question, “Wouldn’t you like your marriage to be fantastic?” Then let God give you the power to make it so! See, a fantastic marriage doesn’t say, “Oh no, the kids are gone!” A fantastic marriage does not mean you will be saying “Yippee, the kids are gone!” A truly great marriage means “Hey, to God be the glory, we have each other.” Liking to be with each other makes the good-byes much sweeter.

I feel I should add a note to those who experience the empty nest without the comfort of a fellow parent to share it with. This is why it is always important to, first and foremost of all, stay close to Jesus. I treasure many pieces of memorabilia in my office as many visitors will testify. One of the most cherished is an actual hand-written note in the hand of Billy Sunday, given to me on my thirtieth anniversary in the ministry by two young men reared up in our church. Beneath a photograph of the famed evangelist, reads a simple admonition, “Stay close to Jesus, all the way.” followed by his signature and the date, October 29, 1932. The old war horse of the Gospel was nearing and end and he told us his secret. If we stay close to Jesus all the way, we can handle His will as He delivers it.

- Pastor Pope -

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