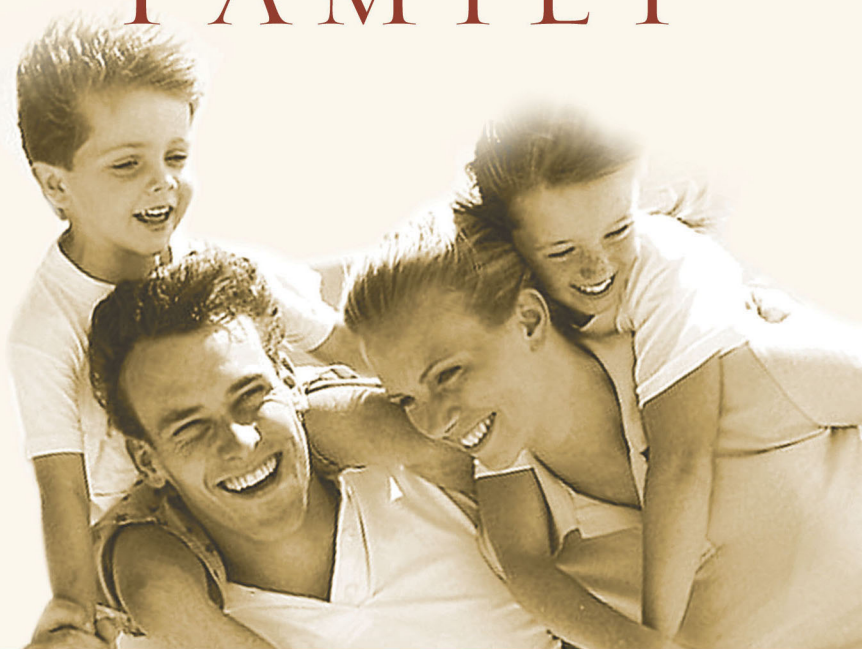


F a m i l y  *F i r s t*

GROWING A SPIRITUALLY

S t r o n g

FAMILY



DENNIS & BARBARA
RAINEY

GROWING
A SPIRITUALLY
STRONG FAMILY



L I F E C H A N G E B O O K S

DENNIS & BARBARA
R A I N E Y



Multnomah Books

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO OUR
SIX MARRIED CHILDREN:

Ashley and Michael Escue

Ben and Marsha Kay Rainey

Samuel and Stephanie Rainey

IT IS OUR PRAYER THAT YOUR
MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES WILL
GROW EVER STRONGER IN CHRIST!

Dennis and Barbara Rainey

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INTRODUCTION

After all these years, the Rainey family still remembers the night I (Dennis) came home from work and found the dishwasher inoperative, the garbage disposal stopped up, and the house looking like the aftermath of a simultaneous flood and tornado. Our three-year-old was sick, crushed cereal nuggets littered the floor, and our twelve-month-old reached for a hug from her daddy with hands dripping melted chocolate chips. Our five-year-old waved a cast, her broken arm still mending, and our ten- and eight-year-olds complained in duet of stomach upsets.

My wife, Barbara, looked ready to run for the hills. If she'd left, I probably would have been right behind her.

If you have children yourself, you know what we mean. The problem with a family is that it is so *daily!* There are good times and times not so good. Being married and raising a family are not for the faint of heart. The journey is long and demanding. Yet we parents know that what we are doing day after day has meaning far beyond these few years we have with our children.

A recent FamilyLife survey among American churchgoers asked the question, "Which issues do you currently

need help with in your life?”¹ Of the answers given most frequently, three of the top four concerns related to spiritual disciplines and growth. As a nation, we are desperately seeking a deeper spiritual life for our children and ourselves. Yet we live in a culture that discourages spiritual growth at every turn.

Do these issues resonate with you, too? Then this little book is for you. We believe it offers the immediate encouragement and direction your family needs. It’s an invitation to push aside the distractions that surround you and refocus on what really counts: God, His Word, family, and eternity.

After nearly thirty years of marriage (make that sixty years—there are two of us!), leading a national ministry, and parenting six children, we have identified ten critical factors in raising a spiritually strong family. If you and your family apply these sound biblical principles and practices, we guarantee that you’ll discover a growing spiritual vitality in your home. We can promise this boldly because it is not just our desire for our families and ourselves—it is God’s desire as well.

This book also includes ten “spiritual seeds”—practical, uplifting activities for you and your mate that will nurture your family’s faith. If you don’t have a mate, keep reading—we’ve written this text primarily for couples, but the principles apply just as much to the single mom or dad.

No matter where you are in your journey as a parent, be encouraged that God is with you and that He values your role as spiritual leader of your family. It is an effort worth the long days—and the sometimes longer nights:

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

May God bless and keep you as you grow a spiritually strong family.

Dennis and Barbara Rainey

Chapter One



SINK YOUR ROOTS

IT ARRIVED WITHOUT WARNING. I (Dennis) was at work when I happened to look out the window; the beautiful blue sky I'd admired minutes earlier was now filled with ominous black clouds. Soon rain pelted the ground, followed by a fierce wind that twisted trees at an impossible angle. Then the tornado siren shrieked. We scrambled away from our desks and searched for cover; many of us huddled under a concrete stairwell in the basement. The radio confirmed our greatest fear—the tornado was headed our way.

As 120-mph winds shattered windows and shook the walls, several of us prayed. I thought of my family and prayed for their safety. (I discovered later that the tornado missed our home by less than three blocks.) After five harrowing minutes, the wind subsided and the sun

returned. We'd survived! Thankfully, no one was hurt.

I stepped outside to view the damage. The tornado had touched down just fifty feet away, tearing out several massive pine trees before hopping over our office building and uprooting more monster pines. I was surprised to see that the root clumps of the uprooted trees were not that large. Then I noticed, not far away, a majestic, ancient oak that looked almost untouched. It was missing just a few broken limbs.

Later I learned that the pine trees in our region have a shallow root system, which is why several of those green, towering beauties became firewood. But the root system of an oak tree plunges deep into the soil, enabling it to withstand even a tornado's fury.

The roots make the difference.

What kind of spiritual root system does a healthy Christian family require? If we want to develop unshakable leadership for a family—the kind of strength that will resist life's tornadoes—we need spiritual roots like the oak tree. The best way we know to ensure such deep roots is to first make sure the parents are becoming “oaks of righteousness” (Isaiah 61:3). Parents need to grow in their faith and become sturdy disciples of Christ. Jesus said:

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine,

so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” (John 15:4–5)

Followers of Christ have understood for centuries the critical importance of certain spiritual activities that mark the life of a growing disciple. We will list three basics, though certainly there are more. If you will make a priority of just these, you will develop a deep root system that will bear up against the storms of life and make you and your spouse steady spiritual leaders of your family.

A PERSONAL DAILY EXPERIENCE WITH JESUS CHRIST

To grow and become all that God created you to be, you must submit to Jesus Christ as lord, master, and maker of your life. The spiritual journey of following Him is not a list of do’s and don’ts, but rather a moment-by-moment encounter with Jesus. Growth occurs in our lives as we submit to Him, walk with Him by faith, and obey Him.

The following is not a checklist, but rather proven spiritual disciplines that help us grow as followers of Him. How you go about implementing them is your call, but applying these basics over time will transform a “baby Christian” into a mature follower of Christ.

- *Prayer.* Good communication is the key in any thriving relationship. This is certainly true with God, too. Scripture urges us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), to pray about everything (Philippians 4:6–7), and in prayer to give thanks in everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18).
- *Bible Study.* Scripture is our owner’s manual for the Christian life. Make the Bible your constant go-to source for decision making, for the truth about God’s character, His ways, and His promises, and for tips on how better to follow Him.
- *Worship.* We are commanded to worship God, individually and collectively. If we are failing to faithfully worship God, not just on Sunday but in our everyday moments, we probably are worshipping something else.
- *Giving/Service.* We are stewards of many personal, material, and financial resources. God has told us that it is better to give than to receive. We need to reap the joy of giving graciously like our Father in heaven gives to us. A type of giving is to serve others in the name of Christ, particularly those who are destitute or lonely.
- *Fellowship.* Don’t miss out on a huge benefit of being a Christian—connection to the body of Christ. When you and your family assemble

together (Hebrews 10:25) in a strong local church—a place where the Scriptures are taught as God’s inspired Word—the wisdom and encouragement of fellow believers will help you effectively lead and grow your family spiritually.

- *Witness.* We have the job of acting on Jesus’ behalf to reconcile the lost to God. This includes befriending neighbors and others who are not believers and planting and reaping the seeds of the gospel.

TRUE FRIENDS

Spiritual growth usually occurs in the context of relationships. We all need people close to us—not just to enjoy friendship and fellowship, but also to reap the benefits of mutual accountability. Both the husband and wife need at least one close, same-sex Christian friend (this is especially true for a single parent). And at least one other couple needs to know how the two of you are doing in your marriage.

We have a pair of friends, a couple, upon whom we frequently lean for counsel, advice, and balance. We discuss everything from discipling children to finances, home maintenance, managing pressure, and even thorny theological issues. We have experienced the “sheltering tree” of their friendship.

A small group of peers can often provide these accountability relationships. Ideally you will be part of a

group of friends who are all seeking to grow individually and together as followers of Christ. (See page 95 for information about HomeBuilders, the world's fastest-growing small group study.)

AUTHENTIC LIVING

Real life begins at home. The toughest place to be a daily, consistent follower of Christ is around the house. When you are at home, surrounded by a mate who knows you well and several little disciples who are intently observing your every word and move, it's hard to keep up a front for long. And you shouldn't. If you have a vital relationship with Jesus Christ, just live it out as honestly and consistently as you can. God will take care of the rest.

There are many ways to show your family that you are serious about following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, but two in particular really count: Admitting your mistakes and asking for forgiveness when you mess up in a relationship—especially with one of your children.

Spiritual Seed No. 1

Within the next three weeks, invite a Christian couple that you enjoy and trust over for dinner. Ask if they will be your “marriage accountability partners” (and if they say yes, serve them both an extra scoop of ice cream!).

As humbling as it is, quite often you can get a “two for one” and demonstrate both of these qualities at the same time! It’s best to initiate this approach when your children are small. (Then it may not feel so humiliating when they’re older!)

I (Barbara) remember a time when our daughter, Ashley, was about four months old. I was attempting to change her diaper, and she was being extra squirmy. I didn’t explode and yell at her, but I was impatient. My conscience was tweaked. I thought, *I should apologize to her. But does this make sense? She’s only a few months old! She won’t remember or understand.* Yet I knew it was the chance to begin a pattern of apologizing when I made a mistake with my child. I told Ashley I was sorry and asked her to forgive me. That apology was good for her and me!

When this happens with an older child, I believe the key is to tell your daughter or son what Scripture says God expects from us when we wrong another person. If we brush things aside, in effect we are sending the message, “I did this and that’s okay. But *you* can’t get away with it.” That’s when children get very confused. But when a parent can admit a mistake to a child, ask for forgiveness, and take the whole situation to God, then there is hope you both will learn from your mistake. Spiritual growth can’t occur in a heart that is too stubborn to admit its mistakes.

When our son, Samuel, was fifteen, I (Dennis) was

supposed to pick him up after a tennis practice. I had told him I might be a few minutes late in order to wrap up tasks at the office. But an urgent phone call came in, and I ended up arriving fifty minutes late. Samuel was nowhere in sight. After many more minutes I finally caught up with him.

When Samuel climbed in the car, I looked him in the eye and said, “Son, I am really sorry. I let you down. I want you to be able to count on me as your dad. Will you forgive me?”

“Sure, Dad, no problem,” he said.

Does that sound simple? It is—sort of. Admitting your faults to your teenage son takes some courage and swallowing of pride. But if we want every member of the family to be spiritually strong, we have to respond to our Lord and walk the way He walked—not just talk about it.

How is your root system? Does it barely reach below the surface, or does it stretch deep into the soil? Invest the necessary time and energy to be “like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit” (Jeremiah 17:8).

Isn't that what we all seek? We want a family of fruitful “trees” that flourish no matter what—a grove filled with “oaks of righteousness.”