

LORD,

KEEP YOUR MANSIONS—

JUST

SAVE

MY CHILDREN

RICHARD W. O'FFILL



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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
MY CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN.
I'M THANKFUL THAT GOD HAS GIVEN THEM TO ME,
FOR IT HAS BEEN THROUGH LOVING THEM
THAT I'VE LEARNED THE MEANING OF THE LOVE OF GOD.

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PROLOGUE

Benjamin Franklin said in *Poor Richard's Almanack*: “To Berr is human, to repent divine, to persist devilish.” I’ve boiled the concept down: “To err is human; not to admit it is dumb.” What we term as trial and error is really experience. Life is an ongoing experience, and what we learn as we go along is up to us. But one thing is for sure—we cannot live our lives over again.

Although we cannot live our lives over again, what life amounts to today is the sum of all our yesterdays. What life will be tomorrow depends on what we do today with those yesterdays.

At one stage in my life, my career meant everything. Next, I found myself in the acquisition stage—I wanted to own a house in the country; more was better. While I was passing through those stages, we were raising four children. Now the children are grown and have children of their own. I still have my career, and I once owned a house in the country. But now my perspective of what’s important has changed.

One day as I was praying for our children and grandchildren, I said (and I hope I was not disrespectful or sacrilegious), “Lord, You have gone to prepare a mansion for me, and I’ve read You also have crowns. That’s OK, but You can keep Your mansions and Your crowns. What I really want is for You to save my children.”

I’m sure I always wanted Him to do that, but through the years my career and the material things of life were in the mix. Now nothing else matters. What I want from having lived this life is for our children—and grandchildren—to be saved.

This book is for parents and grandparents. (Singles can

profit from it if they'll learn from our experience!) As you read this book, we'll look back, we'll examine the present, and we'll look to the future. But you'll notice that this book isn't so much about our children as it is about us. Maybe I shouldn't say that it's about *you*, but it surely is about *me*. It's about feelings of guilt, frustration, even anger and grief. If that were all there was, this book would only make matters worse. But as you read, you'll also find hope, forgiveness, trust, comfort, and love. At least I hope you find those things while reading this book.

Abraham Lincoln has been attributed as saying, "You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time." I have my take on this one, too: "We can fool some of the people all the time, and we can fool ourselves some of the time, but we can't fool God anytime."

This book challenges us to take an honest look at ourselves in the light of some of the things we go through as parents and grandparents. What you'll read isn't always positive or affirming, but I hope that in the end it brings things together in such a way that if we'll be honest with ourselves and with God we'll discover we can be invigorated and strengthened to face the challenges of today. As we do so with increasing success, we'll have hope for tomorrow. This book doesn't attempt to deny reality or mask it, but its chapters will offer comfort, and encourage us to keep on keeping on.

Before I sat down to write, I informed our children of what I intended to do and asked their permission to proceed. They have given me that permission. The one who was the prodigal of this story said, "Dad, after all I put you and Mom through, this is the least I can do." Bless his heart.

Inasmuch as this book is about our most precious "possessions"—our children—you can imagine that as I wrote

and remembered, tears often welled up in my eyes. The illustrations used are taken from real life—ours. As you read each chapter, I'm sure you'll be able to supply other illustrations from the experiences of your own life. Often we aren't aware that others are bearing burdens similar to our own. Our burdens can become much lighter if we heed the words of Scripture: "Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do" (1 Thess. 5:11).

By the way, I've written not as a clinical counselor but as a person who wants to share some experiences as well as lessons learned through the application of scriptural principles. If someone were to ask me why I wrote this book, I would answer that I wrote it to give hope, encouragement, and help to others who have passed through or are passing through similar experiences.

At the end of each chapter is a section I've titled "Consider These Things." It highlights points or principles made in the chapter. There's also an interactive portion called "Discuss With Someone." Scripture says, "Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend" (Prov. 27:17). Sharing together sharpens our thinking and helps us broaden our horizons. Each chapter then closes with a short prayer.

It's my desire that your commitment to our heavenly Father will have deepened as a result of reading this book. And when Jesus comes in the clouds of heaven and asks, "Where is your flock, your beautiful flock?" (see Jer. 13:20) I pray that the response will be "Here we are!"



YOU ARE NOT ALONE

“To understand your parents’ love, you must raise children yourself.”—Chinese proverb.

It was New Year’s Eve. I was sitting in the Florida room, our screened-in back porch. Although it was December 31, the weather was mild. While others were preparing to celebrate, I was hoping the year would hurry up and come to an end, because for me it had been the worst year of my life. Our youngest son was on drugs. We’d sought counsel and were told we should confront him and tell him we knew he was an addict. We did that. I also talked with anyone and everyone, and read several publications on the problem, but things weren’t getting better. I had reached the end of my rope.

Now, sitting in the darkness, I began to cry. I couldn’t stop. I felt all alone. As I wept, I suddenly thought of an organization called Al-Anon Family Groups. They’re like Narcotics Anonymous but offer support for the families of addicts. In the phone book I located the telephone number of an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) chapter. I called and told them I needed to attend an Al-Anon meeting. The voice at the other end of the line was kind and understanding. The person asked where I lived and gave me the address of a nearby meeting.

My wife, unlike me, suffers in silence; I suffer out loud! In a later chapter I share what effect the experiences of rais-

ing our children and grandchildren have had on our marriage, but suffice it to say here that she didn't see what good it would do to attend an Al-Anon meeting, although she agreed to go with me for my sake.

We found a local chapter that had convened in a church not far from where we lived, and we went that very New Year's Eve. When we located the room, we entered shyly. All sat around a table and introduced themselves. I said, "My name is Dick." Everyone else replied, "Hi, Dick." The meeting lasted an hour, and I didn't say anything more, because I cried the whole time. Although each Al-Anon chapter meets only once a week, I discovered that there were other meetings at locations all over the city, and I tried to go to one every night. Slowly but surely I began to feel better, because I realized I wasn't alone.

When you sit around a table with a dozen or more people who are suffering just as you are, it may not make the problem go away, but little by little it becomes more bearable. One person said, "When I attend this meeting, it's as though there's a giant battery in the middle of the table. When I come in the door, I plug in and sit down. When I leave, I feel I've been recharged."

There's always a special dynamic around the table. We don't sit there and tell what is going on at home. We don't need to hear more about that. We come to hear what each of us is doing about it, how we're coping with it, and how we're surviving in spite of it.

Someone has said that life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we react. Often we exert all our energy and emotions trying to change what's happening to us, but that only makes the 90 percent more difficult. That was what had happened to me that New Year's Eve.

I'd been trying every trick in the book to get our son to

quit taking drugs and put his life back together. He'd been expelled from school and replaced as senior class president. We'd been able to work around that with correspondence courses, and somehow got him through high school graduation. He even went on to college. At that point the drug abuse was mostly steroids—at least, as far as we knew—but trying to control the problem was taking its toll. He'd say he was going to stop abusing, and then it would begin again. It had become a real emotional roller coaster. The problem was that I flew the white flag before he did!

That night when I'd first attended an Al-Anon meeting, I began to focus on the 90 percent factor, and from that moment things began to get better for me. The problem didn't go away. In fact, it would continue for 10 years and become far more complicated than it had been on that December night. But at least I'd now be ready for it. That night I discovered I was in good company. I say "good company" because as the weeks, months, and years would pass, my wife and I became aware that in one way or another there's not a family that isn't affected by some kind of grief.

The experience of having a prodigal son radically changed my life. I had been an idealist, looking for perfect people. That's changed; now I'm looking for survivors. You see, "there hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

In plain English this text says that so far we've faced no trial that is not in some way common to everybody else, and we can depend on God to allow us not to be tested more than we can endure. When trials come, He will give us the strength to get through them.

An old song is titled “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” While those words have been the cry of our hearts from time to time, it would probably be more accurate to say, “Sooner or later everybody will know the trouble I’ve seen—that is, if they don’t already know by experience.”

We have the custom of greeting each other with the words “How are you?”

The stock reply is “I’m fine.”

Such a response may not be exactly the truth, but it’s what you’re supposed to say. The exchange is sometimes called phatic speech, a kind of communication that helps form a bond, weak though it may be, between individuals. The question and response reveal friendliness and aren’t trying to exchange information, as a physician might be if he or she asked a similar question.

In recent years when someone has asked me, “How are you?” I’ve wanted to cry out, “Can I really tell you?” But by that time we’ve passed in the hall, each of us weighed down with the burdens we carry and, in many cases, carry alone.

When people explain how thankful they are that their children are all in the church and what wonderful families their children have, I rejoice with them because the Bible says we should rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom. 12:15). I wish I could say the same thing when asked such a question, but for the present it’s not us.

Many parents must cope with the lifelong burden of dealing with disadvantaged children. If God can give the grace and strength to raise and relate to children who have Down’s syndrome or cerebral palsy, can’t He give me the grace and strength to bear the sorrows of drug addiction and divorce? The promise is yes, He can. My wife and I can testify that He can. We aren’t perfect, but we can be survivors.

We’re not the first ones to carry a burden for our children.

It has been this way with parents from the beginning. The first parent was God Himself, the model parent. He did everything the way it's supposed to be done, yet one day a confrontation erupted in the family of heaven, and before it was over fully a third of His heavenly children turned against Him.

After that came Adam and Eve. It wasn't long before these new children were hiding in the bushes—just as all disobedient sons or daughters try to conceal themselves from their parents when they've done wrong.

These first children, who so badly disappointed their heavenly Parent, saw their first child, Cain, become the first murderer and “leave the church” forever. (I said we are in good company.)

There was once a grown son. His name was Edson. His mother was one of the founders of our church. She was in Australia when he wrote to her: “I am not at all religiously inclined” (Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White* [Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1983], vol. 4, p. 94). This after he had for years been active in the church, working with hymnbook preparation, Sabbath school lessons, and the publishing work. The letter nearly crushed her.

The words Ellen White wrote in reply are the cry of all parents whose children are no longer in the church: “You are no more a child. I would that you were. I would cradle you in my arms, watch over you as I have done. But you are a man grown” (*ibid.*, p. 96).

When we were passing through the worst of our experiences, I remember thinking, *What happened to the little boy I once knew? What happened to the little boy who, when he was 2 years old, would climb onto my back, and we'd go into the swimming pool together?* I **remember** looking at pictures of him during those early years and feeling I'd actually lost a child.

It's not hard to look back now, because I know how it

turned out. But I've been forever changed by the experience. I sometimes tell the congregation when I preach that when the children were young I used to have a sermon titled "The Ten Commandments for Raising Children." As the years passed and my youngsters entered their early teens, I decided to change the title to "Ten Suggestions for Raising Children." After nearly 40 years of being a parent, and now as a grandparent of eight grandchildren, I call that sermon "Ten Questions I Have About How to Raise Children."

It used to be that when someone would ask me to pray for their children, I'd pat them on the shoulder and say, "My friend, I'll do that." Although I was sincere, I felt nothing. Now when someone with tears requests, "Please pray for my children," we weep together.

Do I believe it was God's plan that we'd have a prodigal son, that we'd spend five years raising a granddaughter, and that divorce would ravage the homes of most of our children? No. This has been the work of the enemy. Yet through it all God has given us strength and grace, and I believe I'm closer to Him now than I could possibly have been before.

More than once people have come to me and said, "Pastor O'Ffill, we've heard what you're going through. You're such an encouragement to us." This is no credit to my wife or me, but it is a credit to the God we serve. When we get to heaven, if you were to ask me how life on earth had been, I'd have to say that at times it was a nightmare. But I'll thank Jesus forever, because through all our tears He's brought us closer to Him than we could ever have imagined.

Second Corinthians 1:3, 4 says it just right: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves

are comforted of God.”

When we were young we used to say, “It takes one to know one.” This is especially true when you’re a parent whose prayer is “Lord, keep Your mansions—just save my children.” It takes a parent who has been through sorrow to comfort those who are going through it. The time has come for us to stand up and not be afraid to be counted. We are not in bad company. As long as we must hang, let’s hang together!

Great men and women of God from the beginning of time have had prodigal sons and daughters. The reality is that the majority of God’s children have children who have wandered away. Many have believed this couldn’t happen to them, or that it shouldn’t be happening, or that if it were happening it should be kept covered up. I’m glad it hasn’t happened to everybody, but it has happened to most of us, and the question we now have to face is What are we going to do about it?

Those who work with contagious diseases must take precautions lest they contract such diseases and themselves become victims. We must not forget that though we are parents, we are also children—God’s children. And as we work and pray for the salvation of the children He has given us, we must be careful that we honor our heavenly Father and don’t allow ourselves to catch the very disease we’re trying to correct in our loved ones, ending up bitter, resentful, angry, or discouraged. In the chapters that follow we’ll discuss the feelings that arise when our children wander from the Lord, and what we can do about them.

CONSIDER THESE THINGS

1. There are few, if any, families who are not suffering.
2. How we react to life is more important than what happens to us.
3. Even perfect parents have children who leave the Lord.

4. Trials and sufferings can actually serve to bring us closer to Jesus.
5. People who have had similar experiences can strengthen each other.

DISCUSS WITH SOMEONE

1. How can suffering bring us closer to Jesus?
2. Why does knowing that others are going through difficulties make us feel better?

A PARENT'S PRAYER

Heavenly Father, sometimes it seems that nobody but You knows what I am going through. Please forgive me for trying to pretend that it isn't happening to me. Lead me to people with whom I can share experiences, and as we encourage each other we can pray together. Thank You for promising that there will be no trial so bad that it will break us, but that You will give us the strength to get through it. As You make us stronger, help us to encourage others. In Jesus' name, amen.