

PARENTING

How to Raise Children

BY GOD'S

in the Covenant of Grace

PROMISES

JOEL R. BEEKE



“To our great shame, far too many Christians raise their children without much thought as to what makes parenting distinctively Christian. Secular patterns of thought and habit have deeply infected Christian homes, and an antidote is urgently needed. Thankfully, it arrives as *Parenting by God’s Promises* by Joel Beeke. This is a truly helpful and healthy book for Christian parents—deeply biblical, theological, and practical. Parents, prospective parents, and churches will want to keep *Parenting by God’s Promises* close at hand.”

—DR. R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.
President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Ky.

“In this book, Dr. Joel Beeke provides information that is in keeping with what we have come to expect from his preaching and writing: biblically based information about parenting, practical illustrations that really illustrate, and specific instructions that will help people to know how to put the directives of Scripture into practice. In this book, every Christian parent will find solid, dependable, practical, biblical help for bringing children up God’s way. Dr. Beeke places a correct emphasis on the centrality of God’s grace and sovereignty, and the importance of parental responsibility. Parents who are looking for a right perspective and practical help for facilitating this right perspective will find this book to be an excellent guide.”

—DR. WAYNE A. MACK
Director, Strengthening Ministries Training Institute
Author, Strengthening Your Marriage

“In an age of pragmatism, Joel Beeke is a drink of fresh, cool theological water. Raising children is about more than just surviving until they leave home; Beeke reminds us that Christian parents must view their roles in the broader context of God’s redemptive work. Our goal must be raising children who, by God’s grace, come to know and follow the Lord who has redeemed us and called us to Himself. This is a daunting task, and parents need all the help they can get. For those desperate to hear a clear, thoughtful, biblical, theological, Reformed treatise on the subject, *Parenting by God’s Promises* is a valuable read. ”

—DR. VODDIE BAUCHAM
Dean of theology, African Christian University
Lusaka, Zambia

“The defection of young people from the church is creating great concern in our day. Oftentimes the solutions seem to exacerbate the problem. Joel Beeke’s book, *Parenting by God’s Promises: How to Raise Children in the Covenant of Grace*, is a sane, biblical word in the midst of the chaos. The book blends a vibrant covenant theology with wise, practical instruction. Moreover, it keeps a balance between family and church in the nurture of our children. This book is an important read for pastors, elders, parents, and grandparents.”

—DR. JOSEPH A. PIPA JR.

*President emeritus, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary
Greenville, S.C.*

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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To
Foppe VanderZwaag,
faithful pastor, counselor, friend, and colleague,
with whom I have been privileged to co-labor
for ten years of pastoral ministry,

and

my loyal **Family Living Class attendees**
at the Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregation
of Grand Rapids, Michigan,
who have patiently listened to a much longer version
of this book

*Although my house be not so with God; yet he hath made with me
an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is
all my salvation, and all my desire, although he make it not to grow.*

—2 SAMUEL 23:5

THIS IS NOT SO MUCH one promise as an aggregate of promises—a box of pearls. The covenant is the ark which contains all things.

These are the last words of David, but they may be mine today. Here is a *sigh*: things are not with me and mine as I could wish; there are trials, cares, and sins. These make the pillow hard.

Here is a *solace*—“He hath made with me an everlasting covenant.” Jehovah has pledged himself to me, and sealed the compact with the blood of Jesus. I am bound to my God, and my God to me.

This brings into prominence a *security*, since this covenant is everlasting, well-ordered and sure. There is nothing to fear from the lapse of time, the failure of some forgotten point, or the natural uncertainty of things. The covenant is a rock-solid foundation to build on for life or for death.

David feels *satisfaction*: he wants no more for salvation or delectation. He is delivered, and he is delighted. The covenant is all a man can desire.

O my soul, turn today to your Lord Jesus, whom the great Lord has given to be a covenant to the people. Take him to be your all in all.

—Charles H. Spurgeon¹

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FOREWORD

JOEL BEEKE IS THE IDEAL writer for a book about parenting. Let me explain.

Not everyone does everything equally well. For example, the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic is noted for his interpretations of Mahler and Sibelius, but (curiously) has received a fair amount of criticism for his conducting of the mainstream works of Beethoven and Brahms.

It is the same when it comes to parenting. If, then, I were asked, “Who is the best author to write a book on parenting?” I would want to suggest someone with sensitivity and biblical insight, someone who is an impeccable example of the task himself; I wouldn’t want “just anyone” to write it. I would want a man who has modeled godly parenting in his own family; a man who would not simply provide us with pop psychology and trite observations; a man whose commitment to Scripture is without question; and a man who has had years of experience, both personal and pastoral, in the rearing of children.

Joel Beeke meets all of the qualifications mentioned above. In this rich and surprisingly accessible book, he combines the skills of a teacher-preacher and a faithful expositor of Scripture with the warm-hearted devotion of a husband and father who has seen the fruits of that which he writes in his own family and those over whom he has served as a faithful shepherd.

I have known Joel for a quarter-century, spent many days in his home, and watched as he and his dear wife, Mary, nurtured their children. True, I must acknowledge that Joel is a dear friend. My endorsement, therefore, could be viewed with suspicion. But, truth to tell, the friendship has been sustained and deepened because Joel is a friend “in whom there is no guile”; what you will read in these pages comes from someone who models that of which he writes.

Books on parenting, like books on sin, can sometimes produce more guilt than genuine help. Sometimes that is so because there is a failure, at the very heart of the book, to understand the nature of the gospel and how it applies to the duty of parenting. That is not the case here. I so wish that Joel had written this book twenty years ago. It would have helped me, as it now will help you, in the task of being a servant of Christ in our home and in our family. But had he written it then, it would not have been effused with so much grace and understanding.

You probably decided to buy this book before reading what I have to say. You made a wise choice. Now, turn the page and allow a pastor-father-husband to help you with gospel grace and love.

—*Dr. Derek Thomas*

Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C.
Chancellor's Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary

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I wish to thank Greg Bailey, Jonathon Beeke, Kate DeVries, Lois Haley, Deborah Howard, Ray Lanning, Paul Smalley, and Phyllis Ten Elshof for helping to make this book much better than it would have been without their assistance in transcription, editing, and proofing. Above all, I am grateful to my wife, Mary, who also read through the manuscript and put her imprimatur upon it, and our deeply loved children, Calvin, Esther, and Lydia, who have been a great source of joy to us as parents.

Introduction

PARENTING WITH A STRONG HOPE

MY DAD CLAIMED HE WOULD never earn a diploma for good parenting. I suppose most Christian parents feel that way. We all need help in parenting; the only “perfect” parents I know are those who don’t have children.

This book is written for Christian parents, who, in dependence on God’s promises, yearn to train their children in the way of holiness. It represents a condensed form of lectures given to the Family Living Class of the Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I am a pastor (the complete series is available at www.sermonaudio.com). My aim is to bring you a Reformed, covenantal perspective on parenting and to address a number of practical issues not commonly included in child-rearing literature.

This book differs substantially from typical parenting books, which emphasize techniques. This book stresses that parents may raise children with a strong hope based on the covenant promises of God—although this does not mean that parents have nothing to do.

When I speak of the covenant of grace, I mean the promises and commands of God to His people in Christ, binding them together forever (Gen. 17:18). We call this bond a covenant because it is sealed with God’s oath (Deut. 7:8–9). We call it the covenant of grace because it comes out of God’s eternal decision to show grace, stands on the accomplishment of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, offers salvation to people as a gift of grace, and implements salvation through God’s regenerating and transforming grace.

Thus, the covenant of grace is the promise by which God cements the

relationship between Himself and His people in Christ. By the Spirit's grace, God binds Himself as the God and Father of all who believe, trust in His promises, and rest in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ, as the only Savior. He promises to forgive their sins for Christ's sake, to fill them with His Holy Spirit, and to grant them eternal life. Believers, in turn, are bound to this one true God, to trust in Him and to love Him, forsaking the world, crucifying their old natures, and walking in the way of godliness.

The covenant of grace is like a wedding vow that God will never break. The sacrament of baptism is the wedding ring, the outward sign of our union with Him. People broken by sin who have been taught by the Spirit to trust in the gospel are the bride. And Christ is the groom—indeed, the heart of the covenant.

This covenant of grace was first revealed in the promise of a Savior that God gave to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15). It was more fully expressed in the promises God made to Abraham and his seed (Gen. 17:7). Finally, it was renewed, confirmed, and enlarged by the shedding of Christ's blood at Calvary (Matt. 26:28; 2 Cor. 1:20). As in all the covenants God makes with human beings in Scripture, the covenant of grace is extended to believers and their children (Acts 2:39).

Children who are born to at least one believing parent are properly called covenant children (1 Cor. 7:14). As heirs of God's covenant, these children are received into the visible church by baptism. The act of baptism confirms God's promises to them and places them under obligation to seek His kingdom and the salvation offered to them in Christ. Growing up in the community of the church, they are nurtured by the prayers of believers and by the preaching and teaching of God's Word, including its rich invitations and solemn warnings. Their parents are bound to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The congregation to which they belong is also responsible for their evangelization and instruction.

I have divided the book into four sections. Chapters 1–5 examine the theological foundations for parenting in the Scriptures and the Reformed view of how believers should raise their children in the light of the covenant of grace. Chapters 6–14 examine believing parents' office-bearing

responsibilities in child-rearing as prophets, priests, and kings in the home. These chapters provide the basic framework of parenting. Chapters 15–19 address practical areas, such as teaching children piety, how to listen, how to control their speech, and how to handle sibling relationships. In this section, I also summarize the extraordinarily helpful Puritan teaching on child-rearing for today. Chapters 20–22 focus on major issues in raising teenagers—helping them discern God’s will, resist negative peer pressure, and control their anger. In the conclusion, I explain how we can glean comfort from God’s thousand-generation covenant (Ps. 105:8) by preparing our children for marriage and for leaving home, and by preparing ourselves to be God-honoring grandparents. Two appendices contain Cotton Mather’s resolutions on parenting and some thoughts on how churches should treat children. Finally, note that study questions for each chapter are included in the back of the book; these may prove useful for individual reflection or group discussion.

Though I have read a significant number of parenting books, I have not, for the most part, consulted them in preparing this book. I wanted this book to flow primarily out of my study of the Scriptures and my experience as the father of three children and a pastoral counselor to other parents. Hence, there are few endnotes in this volume.

I pray that God will use this book to assist you to parent in accordance with His promises and His covenant, and in dependence on Him and His wisdom as the perfect Father in Christ Jesus.

COVENANTAL

Part

FOUNDATIONS

One

FOR PARENTING

Chapter 1

ENCOURAGEMENT THROUGH THE COVENANT



*And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down,
and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace,
and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.
In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram,
saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land.*

—GENESIS 15:17–18A

HAVE YOU EVER FELT DEEPLY discouraged about your family? Perhaps you understand the doctrine of God’s covenant. You know that you and your family are in God’s covenant. But you still look at your children and ask: “How can God’s promises come true for them? How can anything good come out of this mess we have made of things?”

There is great encouragement for Christian parents in the covenant God revealed to Abram (later called Abraham, Gen. 17:5). Genesis 15 describes the establishment of this covenant and its implications for child-rearing, as well as how we relate to that covenant.

The chapter begins, “The word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward”

(Gen. 15:1). The thought of reward stirred Abram to his depths. He had felt a huge emptiness in his life for many years. He had no child. So, Abram responded to God's Word, saying: "What wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? . . . Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir" (vv. 2–3). God promised Abram that He would give him a son, an heir of his very own, and then added, "Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them . . . so shall thy seed be" (v. 5).

Hearing these mighty promises, Abram "believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness" (v. 6). This important statement, quoted several times in the New Testament, stands forever as the root and anchor of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

A Confirming Sign Requested

To confirm his faith, Abram asked God for a sign. Acknowledging all the promises that God had made to him, Abram asked, "Whereby shall I know?" (v. 8). Abram was not abandoning his newfound faith; he was simply confessing his weakness and the need of a confirming sign from God to strengthen that faith. That's why Abram was not rebuked as Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, was rebuked (Luke 1:20). Abram's question sprang from faith, not unbelief. Zacharias's identical question dripped with unbelief. He impugned the promise of God, so God closed his mouth until John the Baptist was born. But faith can have questions. Abram was asking the Lord for confirmation, saying: "Lord, what Thou art saying to me is wonderful, but how can I know it? Confirm it for me, please. I have lived all these years with no hope of a child of my own."

We should not take Abram's request for a sign as something akin to the practice of many people today in asking for providential signs. They are often looking for an interesting "coincidence" to help guide their decisions. We cannot deal here in depth with how God guides His children.² Suffice it to say that Abram's concern was deeply redemptive. How would God fulfill His promise of a Mediator? How would He execute His saving purpose?

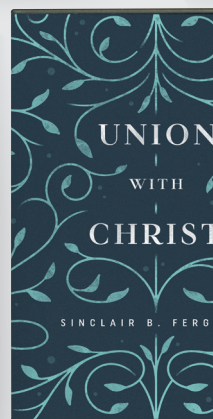
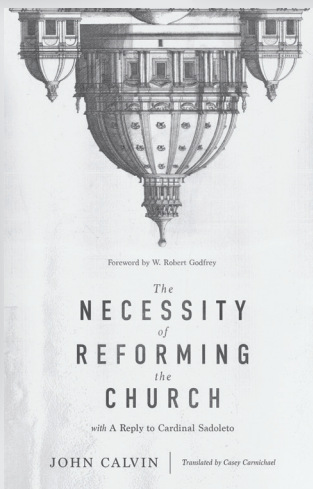
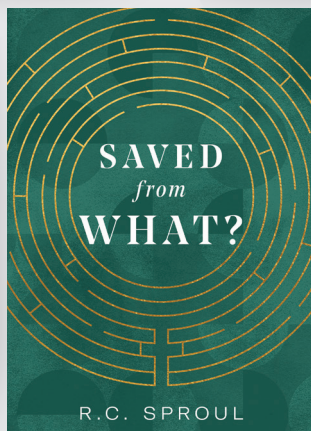
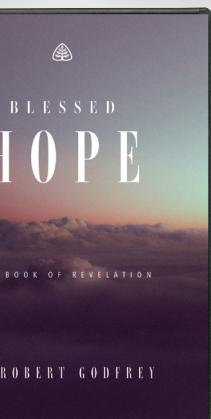
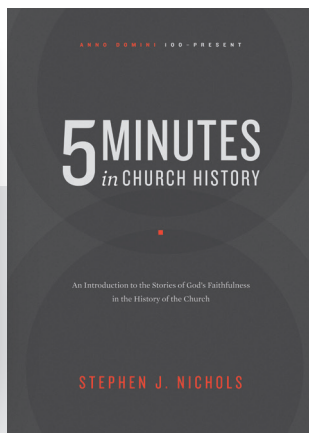
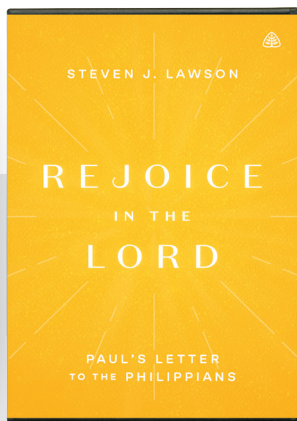
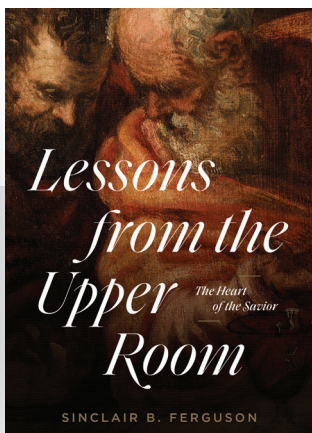
Abram, remember, did not have any part of the Bible, but we have the whole Bible. We also have the history of how God faithfully kept His promises to all the generations of His people. Best of all, we have Christ, the seed of Abraham, who by His death and the shedding of His blood confirmed and renewed the ancient covenant with Abraham and his seed as the “new testament in my blood” (1 Cor. 11:25; Gal. 3:16, 29; Heb. 8:6–12). “All the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God” (2 Cor. 1:20). For this reason, the sign that Abram received is also a sign for us, especially as Christ fulfilled it in His death on the cross. Moreover, God signifies the same truth to us in the sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which are confirming signs for believers today. So, let us lean on God’s Word and sacraments, on His covenant and on the promises, all of which point to His trustworthy Son, “the Strength of Israel [who] will not lie nor repent” (1 Sam. 15:29), and keep laboring for our children.

As we do so, God teaches us that the success of happy, well-adjusted, spiritually minded, Christ-honoring, God-glorifying, Scripture-grounded children growing into adulthood is *never* because of us. Sometimes the Lord makes us realize our own insufficiency so that we learn to rest completely on the trustworthiness of His covenant and on the character of God Himself as the Author of it.

What does that mean? When Abram asked for a sign, God told him to gather some animals, cut them in two, and put the pieces on two sides so that someone could walk down the middle (Gen. 15:9–10). Abram knew what was happening; the steps God had commanded were part of a common way of making a covenant in his day. The two covenant-making parties would cut some animals through the middle and make two parallel lines with the pieces. Then both parties to the covenant would walk down the center, between the halved pieces. When they got to the end, they would shake hands, as if to say, “God do so to me, and more also, hewing me in pieces as we have done to these animals, if I break my covenant with you.” So, God was saying: “Abram, you want a sign, so I will give it to you. I will give you a wonderful sign of the covenant.”

Abram got the animals, cut them up, and waited for God to come so they

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