

*For my family,
who allow me to share our stories:

Our almost-grown children,
Derek, Lindsay, and Kendall;

and their father, my husband, Lynn*

GIVE THEM WINGS

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~ Introduction ~

This is the story of one family's journey through a major transition—the time when teenagers are growing up and leaving home. It's a tricky transition. The rules of parenting grow fuzzy as our adolescents navigate that shaky bridge between childhood and adulthood. They are trying to become people who don't need us anymore. We are trying to become parents who can accept and encourage that independence.

Our bittersweet feelings often get mixed up along the way. Sometimes I long for those days when a chubby cherub held up her arms, begging for my hug because only I could change her mood from sad to glad. Yet I get goose bumps as I watch this same cherub confidently carry on a conversation with a college professor.

We face some tough emotional jostling in this journey. If *family* is a priority and we eagerly pour ourselves into the lives of the others, watching kids leave home is difficult. The closeness we've created becomes the stumbling block we have to crawl over in the adjustment. In the midst of these feelings, I pray that my love roots and encourages them but doesn't hold them back.

We can't rely on instincts during this home stretch of active parenting. My instinct is to hold on tighter when the issues of independence come closer together and the consequences of mistakes seem greater. But I know that's the very response that thwarts my goal. I need to become more of an observer and less of a stage director.

We can't rely on our own adolescent experiences, either. Our teenagers are growing up in a world far different from the one we rah-rahed our way through in high school. It's been said that the

world has undergone more significant changes in the last 50 years than in all of history up to that point. I'm alarmed by many of those changes, and I have to parent with my eyes wide open, constantly seeking God's unchanging plumb line of truth in a changing world.

The passion behind this book comes from my heart's longing to make this transition in such a way that we emerge as a family that seeks to reunite around a Thanksgiving table or at a Fourth of July celebration—not out of obligation but from a genuine desire to be together. The pattern is biblical. God calls us to raise our children in families where they are nurtured, protected, prepared, and then released to venture forth, leaving father and mother, yet remaining in loving relationship with them. How do we get from here to there? How do we go from protecting and controlling to supporting and observing? How do we cope with the emptiness when they go? I've often asked myself those questions, and this book is written around a mother's struggle for answers. I'm not an expert; I'm a parent.

We're an average family. My husband, Lynn, and I have three children. At the time of this writing, two are in their early twenties, and the other is finishing high school. Though nearly all children eventually leave home for somewhere, ours have left for college, so that's the context of my descriptions. Along the way, we've faced average problems. We're far from being a perfect family; we make plenty of mistakes; and we are still in process, because a family's journey of growth and change never ends. Some of my stories are still warm from the firing line, and I tell them with my family's permission.

Writing this book has been a spiritual journey for me, an act of daily surrender as I prayed to be, as Mother Teresa once said, "a pencil in the hand of God." I hope these words I've put on paper will encourage you through this transitional time of letting go, launching adolescents, and living at home without them.

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A Family in Flux

I sat down one recent afternoon with a pile of this year's photographs to look for an appropriate Christmas card picture. I've always enjoyed this annual task, reminiscing as I sort through the possibilities taken during summer vacations, on the first day of school, or even around the kitchen counter at some spontaneous family celebration.

But I started with a smaller pile this year. Our nearly grown kids all had jobs, so we couldn't squeeze in a summer vacation. Only one of our three is left at home to start school. And with two away at college most of the year, Lynn and I find fewer family photo opportunities around the kitchen counter.

Still, I reminisced as I flipped through the pictures. There were several from a family hike in July, but they're too dark, because that outing turned into a night hike when 21-year-old Derek vowed we could make it all the way to the top of Green Mountain, even though we started at 6:00 P.M.

"No sweat!" he insisted.

I should have known better. He's the same offspring who thinks running a quick two miles in 95-degree heat at high noon is "no sweat." His words reminded me of a motto that often helps in parenting our almost-grown children. The motto advises: "Don't sweat the small stuff. Only go to blows over the biggies."

The question of whether we can make it to the top of a mountain and back before dark certainly falls into the "small stuff" category, so I hushed up most of my doubt. But as we nervously picked our way back down that slippery, rocky trail in pitch-black darkness, I had to hold my tongue and keep reminding myself that at least we were involved in a memorable, all-family activity.

I also have pictures of all three kids taking turns carrying our new puppy down the trail on that same hike. They had insisted the four-month-old golden retriever would love the exercise. "No sweat," I think Derek repeated as he helped the 30-pound puppy into the car. Again I voiced some doubt, but I added to myself that great disclaimer that covers differences of opinions with almost-grown children: *Your problem—your consequence.*

When the poor little (?) puppy fell into an exhausted heap and refused to budge in the dark, the kids began carrying him without a single word of complaint. In this case, a picture is worth a thousand words, but those photos won't work for the Christmas card, either. No one else would appreciate a picture of kids carrying a pathetic, gangly puppy down a mountain trail in the dark except a mother who wanted to say, "I told you so."

We also have a few pictures from a backpacking trip. That's another story. When our kids were younger, they rolled their eyes in disbelief at the absurd notion of strapping sleeping bags on their backs and trekking to some remote spot in the mountains to sleep for a night. But since our two older ones have gone off to college, they've been miraculously transformed. Backpacking is in. The tougher, the better. Call it role reversal, but now I've become the reluctant one, because my maturity and experience are teaching me

something new about camping: *It always sounds like more fun than it really is.*

When I think about camping, I look forward to finding an idyllic campsite where I'll fall sound asleep to the comforting babble of a nearby brook and the whisper of gentle breezes in the pine trees. When I actually get to the camping spot, I usually find some marshy, rain-soaked ground with mosquitoes that keep me awake by whining in my ears all night while I toss and turn, suddenly remembering every bear-mauls-camper story I've ever heard. My hands get grimy, which makes cleaning my contact lenses impossible, and cooking meals in the wilderness is just plain hard work. I'm getting dangerously close to growing out of camping—just when our children are growing into it.

Anyway, none of the pictures from that outing will work for the Christmas card, because we look like a zombie family that's been in the backwoods for months, with scruffy beards, wild hair, and rumpled, dirty clothes. Most important, *I* look the *worst*, and as long as I choose the Christmas card picture, I won't look the worst.

As I view the little pile of rejects, I realize we've run out of options. We can't take any more family pictures—the college kids have gone back to school. And then truth starts to sink in: Maybe we've reached the end of our Christmas-card-picture days.



We are a family in flux on a journey through transition. We're a family of mostly adults instead of one with parents and children. Our all-together family gatherings are fewer and farther between, and they're often marked by the friendly differences of opinions that boil down to this bottom line: At this stage of the game, we don't always know exactly who's in charge.

I used to dread the thought of entering the season of the emptying nest. But now that I'm here, I don't mean to sound all down about it. I'm confused sometimes, but I'm less resistant and more accepting in spite of some predictable losses.

At first, I felt angry about the unfairness of it all. As Derek left home and then Lindsay, I asked God, “Why did You give us the gift of family—a circle of close relationships—and then take it away?”

Now I know He does not take family away.

He merely changes its shape.

And in the changing, we have a choice. We can resist, clinging to the past and moaning over our losses. Or we can turn our faces toward this new season with hopeful expectations. I’ve flip-flopped between both responses, but I’m aiming for the latter. As I look back over our journey so far, I can see some footholds that have helped me along the way.

Anticipation is worse than reality. Isn’t this true of most of life’s anxieties? The hours I spend dreading my dentist appointment are much worse than my 45 minutes in the chair. My fear of making a difficult phone call is much worse than the call itself. When our children are young and desperately in need of our constant love and protection, we dread the thought of their leaving home one day. “They won’t be ready, and I won’t be ready,” we tell ourselves passionately and rationally.

That’s exactly what my friend Sue told me when I ran into her recently.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Not good,” she admitted in a shaky voice. “It’s Matthew, our baby. He went off to kindergarten this week, and I feel so sad. I know this sounds silly, but I feel like I’m going to blink, and suddenly our kids will be grown and gone for good.” Her eyes filled with tears, and she shook her head apologetically. “See? I’m a mess!”

I smiled sympathetically, because I remember feeling exactly the same way years ago when a predictable, bittersweet milestone of independence—a child’s first step, first sleep-over, or first day of school—dramatically magnified the reality of their growing up and leaving home. I especially remember the day my own “baby” skipped happily down the driveway to be swallowed up by that huge, yellow school bus that whisked her off to kindergarten with a pack of

squealing children I didn't know. That bus symbolized *leaving home*, and as I walked back up the driveway alone, my life passed before me like a video on fast forward. When the movie stopped, our three children were gone, leaving me to live in that dreaded place called the empty nest.

I've never liked the term *empty nest* because it sounds so utterly ... empty! When I was little, I looked forward to growing up, getting married, and having children, but I never thought about living in an empty nest.

When Lynn and I got married and had three children in five years, I began to dread the empty nest for three specific reasons called Derek, Lindsay, and Kendall. They totally changed my life, my passions, and my definition of myself. They became part of my very being. As a friend said, "Becoming a parent means your heart is never your own again." Writer and mother Dale Hanson Bourke warns that "becoming a mother will leave her [a woman] with an emotional wound so raw that she will be forever vulnerable."¹

After becoming a parent, I discovered I couldn't go away, even overnight, without feeling a bit incomplete. A siren in the distance always made me wonder where my children were. Their hurt feelings of rejection wounded me deeper than any physical pain I've ever endured. In an instant, I could measure their well-being by looking into their eyes, watching them walk across a playground, or listening to their voices. And I constantly needed to feast my eyes on them for that kind of checkup, because *my* well-being depended on *their* well-being. No wonder I couldn't imagine waking up one morning and not having them around!

Oh, sure, like any young mother, I often longed for the privacy and the luxury of sleeping until I wanted to get up in the morning, of finishing a phone conversation without interruption, or of getting dressed all by myself. I dreamed of temporary interludes from parenting—but never of giving up the job altogether.

I dreaded the thought of my kids leaving home. Family has always been a high priority for us, and we functioned regularly as a

unit—five people together. We filled all the chairs around our dinner table. We posed for the Christmas card picture together (whether it came out well or not). We visited grandparents together. We celebrated family birthdays and Thanksgivings together. I couldn't imagine removing one person from the tableau. It would throw the whole unit off balance.

These were my dreads of years ago, but experience has shown me that dread and worry are the paralyzing emotions one conjures up while standing in the present and fretting about the possibilities of the future.

I've learned that those dreads and fears ignore the sufficiency of God, who promises to provide for our needs *when we reach our point of need*, not years in advance when we're fretting over the possibilities. To dread the thought of a kindergartner going off to college is to totally jump over and ignore what God will do in the in-between time. In *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom described how her father helped her learn this lesson when she was afraid of dying at some unknown time in the future. He used an analogy about riding to Amsterdam on the train.

"When do I give you your ticket?" he asked.

"Why, just before we get on the train."

"Exactly. And our wise Father in heaven knows when we're going to need things, too. Don't run out ahead of Him, Corrie. When the time comes that some of us will have to die, you will look into your heart and find the strength you need—just in time."²

When the day comes for children to leave home, we're given the strength to cope—just in time.

Transitions are tough. Still, most of us parents face a difficult but temporary period of adjustment. When we love passionately, we can hurt deeply. Good-byes are tough. Change is difficult. Losses cause pain. The exit of a child, especially a first or last child, forever alters

the structure of a family and the definitions of individuals. The child's physical absence leaves a gaping hole in our lives for a time and often catches us by surprise, as if we never saw it coming. Our grief is real and a necessary part of a family's journey through transition.

Admittedly, some parents accept these leave-takings less emotionally than others, partly based on their God-given personalities. According the Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator, a popular method of measuring responses to life, I am a "feeling" person, which means I instinctively respond to life on a feeling level and experience losses deeply. I also resist change. I find security in the familiar—a reliable restaurant, the same old haircut, the comfortably familiar arrangement of our living room furniture. Transitions are tough for me; I grieve greatly, but the feelings are temporary. I've learned they do pass.

God's plan is perfect. Our Creator, who divided the year into seasons and the days into mornings and nights, also divided people into families. He created this gift of a structure to offer stability and loving security in the midst of an unstable and insecure world. He intended families to be the safe haven where children are born and raised, a place where the tender shoots are nurtured until their roots grow strong and deep.

But that nurturing process has a purpose and time frame. We raise our children to leave us. We take care of them while we're teaching them to take care of themselves. We transfer freedom and responsibility from our shoulders to theirs in a slow and orderly process as they grow up. When that task nears completion, we let go, and they go off on their own. That's part of God's plan for families in the changing seasons of life.

Sometimes we get so immersed in the child-rearing period that we fail to see beyond into God's plan of changing seasons. Imagine life as a whole pie, with each season being a different wedge. The child-rearing wedge, though intense and consuming, accounts for only one fraction of that whole pie. When we're immersed in that wedge, we have little energy or vision to imagine life beyond that moment. Now that I'm on my way out of that wedge, however, I'm

putting it all in better perspective. God willing, I'm apt to spend twice as many years with my adult children in other seasons as I spent actively parenting them in the child-rearing season. That motivates me to let go of the parent-child modes and move toward a mutually satisfying adult-to-adult relationship.

Another perspective is that Lynn and I will be about 50 years old when the last child leaves home, and we hope to spend maybe 25 years alone together after all the kids are gone. That's five times as many years as we spent together before they were born. That knowledge motivates me to maintain a strong marriage relationship, even in the midst of the hectic distractions of raising and launching children.

I'm also seeing something else about these seasons as I exit this one. Though I've heard it a thousand times, these familiar words suddenly have new meaning: *Enjoy these years. They pass so quickly.* They do, and that reality motivates me to squeeze all the gusto out of the remains of this present season.

Years ago, an older parent advised me to "live life with no regrets." I think that father meant I should eat my fill of peaches in August, when they're ripe and in season, so that when they disappear from the stores in September, I won't feel quite so sad. Another parent told me to "make the most of life's irretrievable moments." Surely, she meant for me to recognize and embrace those moments in each season that won't come around again. There's a Latin term for the same advice: *carpe diem*, or "seize the day." That's a good way to live.

As I linger in the last days of the child-rearing season, I'm learning that God's timing and plan are perfect, even if I don't feel that way in the midst of tough transitions. I have to let go of the old to make way for the new.

God promises new beginnings. This toehold of truth is comforting me right now. It's autumn at our house, a paradoxical season when the leaves are turning colors and falling off the trees, yet the harvest of corn, squash, and apples is abundantly rich. Something is ending, but something new is beginning.

We've just returned from taking Derek and Lindsay back to college on the West Coast. The suitcases are put away. I've answered the mail and returned the phone calls. Kendall has started high school, and on the outside, it looks as if life has returned to normal. But after a pleasant summer of being together as a family of five again, I have to face the adjustment of living with this downsized version of three once more.

Experience helps me know I'll get through this bumpy place. Since I've been here before, I know I can do it again. I miss our two older ones terribly, especially the sight of them coming through the front door or the sound of their voices in the hallway. But the feelings of loss lessen in intensity and duration. I walk past their empty bedrooms with a little less sadness each day. And when I wake up in the darkness of early morning, feeling forlorn about the ending of this season in my life, I have a remedy.

I get out of bed and watch the sunrise.

I crawl out from under the covers, pull on my jeans and a sweatshirt, get a mug of steaming coffee, and sit on the front steps of our home. I first see a soft glow gathering on the eastern horizon, and then the fingers of dawn begin to lighten the dark places all around me, as though God is turning up His rheostat on a new day. Eventually, though I can't pinpoint the exact moment, night becomes day.

As I sit there sipping my coffee in the cool morning air, I feel included in this new beginning, as if God is gently beckoning me into a new day and a new season packed with potential and thumbprints of His presence. None is more powerful than the dawn, His visible, daily reminder that out of every ending, He always creates a new beginning.

Epilogue

Summer has come again to our house. We're a family of four this season. Derek is home, an almost-senior who is working as an intern and gathering measuring cups, dishes, and cooking skills in anticipation of moving into his first apartment this fall. Lindsay stayed at school for a summer session, and Kendall is readjusting to sharing her parents, car, and bathroom again.

This family's journey through transition is not yet over. We're still in process, changing shape as God stretches us toward new purposes. In the midst of the changes, I still like to get up to see the sunrise. On some mornings, I sit on a stool at the kitchen counter, where I can watch God turn night into day through the windows to the east.

Later I can sit on that same stool and watch the sun setting over the Rocky Mountains through windows to the west. I like the sunset time of the day.

I recently saw a time line that compared the average length of life to the hours in a day. For instance, if you're 15, the time is 10:25 A.M. If you're graduating from college, it's nearly noon. At 47 years old, I'm at about 5:30 P.M.

I think 5:30 P.M. is a good place to be. In an earlier season, when I had hungry little children, life was hectic. But 5:30 is more serene. The hardest hours of the day are behind me; the best ones are before me. Quieter hours. Time to dig deeper into relationships around a dinner table. Time to read. Time for more meaningful, less-pressured priorities.

I'm thankful I can see God's reminders of sunrises and sunsets out our windows.

Years ago, I copied a quotation on a scrap of paper. It's been so long that I've forgotten where the words came from, but the statement was something about "a door or window opening and letting the future in."

That's what God does on our earthly journeys. He opens doors and windows along the way so we can catch glimpses of His love, His awesomeness, or His plan for our future. We see a family of foxes playing, a mountaintop beckoning, or a child changing into a woman.

Maybe we hardly notice the meaning at the moment. It happens too quickly, or we're distracted. But as we look back, we remember the window and say, "Aha! That's what You meant, God!"

As I look back over the family journey I've described in this book, these are some messages I got from windows along the way:

- Anticipating change is more difficult than living through it, because God is sovereign, and change is part of His plan for us. He loves us where we are, but He loves us too much to leave us there. And He is sufficient. He meets our needs when we reach the point of need.
- We experience great grief over our losses, because grief is the privileged price we pay for loving the way God calls us to love. Love is not cheap. Love demands sacrifice.
- As the family changes shape, we expand our definitions of ourselves. We don't get stuck in our past; we let go of the old to make room for the new. We allow the blessings of our past to become part of the rich root system from which we draw nourishment for the future.

- Change demands surrender, and life is a series of surrenders and relinquishments. Surrender means greeting each day with this personal vow: “The answer is yes, Lord. What is the question?”
- Even as we stretch toward change, some definitions stay solidly the same. Even as our children’s independence gives us increased independence, we’re still dependent beings. I am still utterly dependent on God, because apart from Him I can do nothing, and I’m utterly dependent on Jesus’ death on the cross for my righteousness each day. I am also dependent on my husband, Lynn, and our marital commitment to encourage and sacrifice for and cherish each other as we go through this transition together.
- As we finish this transition and enter a season of life without children living at home, we focus not on what we’ve lost but on what we have left—and what is still to come: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!” (Isa. 43:18-19).

Amen!

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Dale Hanson Bourke, *Everyday Miracles* (Dallas: Word, 1989), p. 2.
2. Corrie ten Boom with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Washington Depot, Conn.: Chosen, 1971), p. 33.

Chapter 2

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2. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, special ed. (Wheaton, 111.: Tyndale, n.d.), p. 28.
3. Charles Swindoll, *Simple Faith* (Dallas: Word, 1991), p. 244.

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2. The video series "Choosing My Religion" is available from Ligonier Ministries at 800-435-4343.
3. Jerry and Mary White, *When Your Kids Aren't Kids Anymore* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1989), p. 47.