

WHAT EVERY  
MAN WISHES  
HIS FATHER HAD  
TOLD HIM

*Byron Forrest Yawn*



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## **WHAT EVERY MAN WISHES HIS FATHER HAD TOLD HIM**

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# CONTENTS

Foreword by John MacArthur . . . . .	7
In Pursuit of Biblical Manhood . . . . .	11
1. The Space Where a Dad Should Be . . . . .	19
2. Grace: Never Move Beyond the Gospel . . . . .	33
3. Masculinity: Manhood Is Knowing Where the Plunger Is . . . . .	41
4. Affection: “I Love You, Son” . . . . .	51
5. Ambition: Never Choose Not to Succeed . . . . .	57
<i>R.E. Lee’s Letter to His Son</i> . . . . .	65
6. Sincerity: It’s the <i>Why</i> that Matters Most . . . . .	67
7. Accountability: You Are Not Your Own Best Counselor . . . . .	75
8. Confidence: Be Comfortable in Your Own Skin . . . . .	85
<i>Don’t Be “That Guy”</i> . . . . .	92
9. Marriage: It Comes with a Basin and an Apron . . . . .	95
10. Wives: Don’t Live in Fear of Your Wife; Lead Her . . . . .	101
11. Sin: Die to Self Upside Down . . . . .	109
<i>Man Laws</i> . . . . .	117
12. Sex: It Is Not Evil . . . . .	121
13. Pornography: Hugh Hefner Will Die Alone . . . . .	129
14. Eternity: Live Urgently . . . . .	145
15. Consistency: Learn to Plod . . . . .	153
<i>Abraham Lincoln’s Letter to His Son’s Teacher</i> . . . . .	158
16. Thinking: If You Lower the Standards, You Can Reach Them Every Time . . . . .	161
17. Work: It’s a Means and Not an End . . . . .	169
<i>Class Offered at Boyce College—“Band of Brothers”</i> . . . . .	174
18. Integrity: Be the Man They Think You Are . . . . .	179
19. Afterword . . . . .	187
Notes . . . . .	190



## THE SPACE WHERE A DAD SHOULD BE

*Then Joseph fell on his father's face,  
and wept over him and kissed him.*

{ GENESIS 50:1 }

**W**hat kind of relationship did you have with your father?" And a thousand little memories flood the mind of a son. Immediately a forty-one-year-old husband and father of three is eight again. Few questions have the force to stop grown men in their tracks as does this one. The feelings run deep here. I mean really deep. I asked it of a rather spry waiter once to prove its power to a friend. The waiter was so struck by the apparent insight into his life he was inclined to lie down in the booth opposite me and assume the fetal position. Ask someone yourself. You'll see what I mean. It evokes either warm reminiscent smiles or deeply resentful gazes. It opens a window into a soul. Fathers are important. I mean really important.

Maybe the best answer thus far has been "Good, but not much." Which means, of course, Dad was a good man but not readily available. In the vast majority of cases, however, the answer is not even this favorable. Rare is the smile. Disappointment reigns. Some dads were "merely" negligent. Some were too busy. Some were passive. Some were mute. Some were angry. Some were physically abusive. Some were decent. Some were shells. Some vanished. In nearly every case—even in the worst-case scenarios—the answers are tilted toward gracious and affable. They're more like excuses than answers. Sons have an instinct to

cover their fathers' failures. Sons love their dads even when their dads did not love them. It's part of being a son. It's also a sign of how sons are doomed to mimic their fathers' primary failure—*denial*.

If you're in the minority that considers your dad's impact as generally favorable, I'd have you ask a deeper question. Was your dad simply around, or was he actually engaged in your life? There's a big difference. One is a figure. The other is a mentor. How many life lessons did your dad actually offer you? How many principles did he offer when you were eight that you remembered when you were twenty-eight? How many of us had dads who were observant enough to step in and guide our hearts, or facilitate our calling in life? Maybe your dad taught you how to manage money, or instilled a work ethic. But did he teach you how proper money management and a work ethic are tied to much bigger realities? Did he expose you to the deeper joys of such virtues?

Many men will insist their dad's inattention has had no great effect on them. Trust me—they're lying. Boys need fathers like trees need trunks. I've seen strong and sturdy sixty-year-old men weep in sight of the empty space where a dad should have been or at the indelible marks left by tyrants who posed as fathers. So much in a man's life can be traced back to the father—good and bad.

## YOU'RE NOT CRAZY

A prime example is the epidemic struggle with sexual sin among Christian men. Oftentimes, when helping men deal with this sin, I will ask, "Did you receive any instruction on sex in your adolescence?" In almost every case the answer is no. Your dad may have offered a single awkward lecture on anatomy, but that's barely even helpful. Mainly we (the church) give the impression that sexuality and the natural desires of young men (or women) are something to be ashamed of. Is it any wonder it's such a pervasive problem? When MTV is teaching our sons everything they know about sex and how to value women, they're doomed.

At the exact moment a young man faces the most substantial physical, emotional, hormonal, and social changes of his life, he's left to

figure it out for himself. We stay on them about cleaning their rooms, but don't say a word to them about sex. They go to bed dreaming of Legos in their childhoods and wake up Sasquatch. No one warns them of what's coming. No one does them the incredible favor of assuring them that this bizarre physical transformation is normal. They grow up thinking they're crazy.

In the absence of a guide it's impossible to maneuver this space and live to tell about it. An unsupervised adolescent boy doesn't have a prayer in this culture. You might as well drop him off at the porn shop on his thirteenth birthday. Seriously. Point is, in most cases this struggle (and many others) in men can be traced back to the empty space a father was designed to fill. Is it any wonder adult sons are so resentful of their fathers?

## FATHER WOUNDS

At the same time, there are way too many "men" blaming their personal issues on their fathers' failures. You can justify almost anything by lifting up your psyche and showing people your "daddy wound." I know of men who've abandoned their wives and families and offer their "wounded spirits" as justification. At present, blaming our hang-ups on our "father wounds" is the default position. It's trendy to have one. Like psychological tattoos. They all read, "Dad hurt my feelings." The expression "father wound" is now in the realm of Christian clichés. Which means...it's virtually meaningless.

Nonetheless, deep behind the lines of "suburbanity" this psychosomatic phenomenon is assumed to be true. Men eat it up. You mention the concept to fresh ears and to them, it magically explains the origin of every flaw they've ever had. Some of the most popular books on men are perched on this singular conviction. It's always a pleasant little journey from assumption to foregone conclusion.

Just consider the number of men's Bible studies and accountability groups dedicated to this concept. Men sit around and discuss it for weeks on end, sounding more like girls than men. There's no way this is healthy. What good does it do to incessantly identify a chronic ache

without taking action to correct it? It does no good. It makes us more self-absorbed than we already are. Trust me—the men in your small group may be nodding in affirmation on the outside, but they’re rolling the eyes of their heart on the inside. They’re tired of hearing about your dad’s lack of affection.

I get it. I’m not suggesting there’s no truth to the concept of emotional wounds. Some of us had messed-up childhoods. I have friends with painful stories. In some instances their personal suffering was so intense it’s hard to relate. Comparatively, my dad never beat me with a half-inch thick branch or made me sleep under my bed so as not to hear me sob. Some dads are pure evil. Generally, all of our dads made mistakes and had moments (or decades) of angry excesses. No man is perfect, and others are as far from it as possible.

Honestly though, so what? Get in line. Who hasn’t been hurt or sinned against—even by people we’re hard-wired to trust? Should we ask our wives about the innumerable “stupid wounds” they’ve received at our hands? Or should we talk to our kids? Or do we want to compare wounds with the Savior of sinners? This planet is littered with fallen narcissistic scavengers (including you and me) who’ll do almost anything to get what they want. Besides, if we were as angry at our sin as we are with our dad, we might actually get past some stuff. By the third (or ten thousandth) sad retelling of our disadvantaged youth, what good has it done anyway?

## WHAT THE CROSS SAYS TO VICTIMS

There’s a fine line between blame and acceptance. The balance between focusing on the injustices in our life and taking personal responsibility for our lives is difficult. Many men are imprisoned by memories, or the lack thereof. They can’t make it past the inequity of their experiences. The solution here is mainly theological and not therapeutic. It’s a matter of focus. My point is, it’s not about becoming intimate with your hang-ups. It’s about becoming intimate with your Creator. Will you spend your days examining self, or something greater than yourself? Other men with equally painful memories have found freedom

in the cross. They have a different type of internal struggle. They can't get over the "inequity" of Christ's death.

What's most notable about this last category of people is their normalcy. They're stable, grateful, and productive people who love Christ. They seem never to draw attention to the scars etched in their lives, but are simultaneously better people because of them.

Those who adhere too tightly to the father wound philosophy tend to approach life as victims. Victims of their circumstances. In some cases childhood memories serve as the basic justification for their own misbehavior and delinquency. "Someone hurt me; therefore, you must cut me slack as I destroy everything in my path." Life is spent examining their wounds ad nauseam. Daddy wounds are like rocks in their shoes.

This outlook on life is why some men never grow up. It's an excuse for immobility and failure. They have trendy haircuts at fifty, frustrated wives, wear skinny jeans (strangely resembling elves), discontented jobs, massive debt, still shop at the Gap, try way too hard to be hip, and every single conversation you have with them is about them and why they are still living in their mother's basement emotionally. It's hopeless.

The other perspective has God and the cross in view. It takes in the same pain from a completely different angle. The cross looms over and brings clarity to the trauma that creeps into every life. It alone explains the real reason people do the horrible things they do—*they're sinners*. This perspective requires humility because it acknowledges the mystery of sin. Who can explain why sin causes people to do the things they do? No one. Sin is intentional and irrational at the same time. People do these things because it's in their natures to do them as sinners. But, rather than ending in fatalism, this awareness frees us. It keeps us from fixating our attention on the *why* of our circumstances. This world is sinful, that's *why* people do the things they do.

The cross promises all the abused and abandoned that there will be justice. No one gets away. But, the cross goes farther. It doesn't let the "victims" off the hook either. We've all sinned against people. Everyone has made a victim of someone. The cross is essentially screaming this at humanity. We're all bad people. God did not die to save us from



our daddy wounds. He died to save us from ourselves and the consequences of who we are. He died because rescuing sinful humanity from the wrath of God required a brutal death. We're brutal people. This fact brings our self-fulfilling unending therapy session to an abrupt close. Before God we're no better than our abusive, negligent, or "good, but not much" fathers.

Furthermore, the cross proves that our greatest need is not psychological and/or therapeutic, but spiritual. Understanding our circumstances, backgrounds, or psychological makeup may be helpful as far as it goes, but it can't change your heart. It won't help you truly forgive because it begins with an imperfect standard—*you*. The cross presents us with the perfect standard. It's the truth about it all. The greatest tragedy in human history is the death of Christ. The innocent Son of God died in the place of guilty sinners. He was brutalized at the hands of ungrateful rebels. In this sense, the only innocent victim on the planet is Christ. The rest of us—all of us—are guilty. The cross puts the spikes in each of our hands and makes us face the truth about who we are.

From the view of the cross our forgiveness of others is based on the infinitely greater standard. We forgive in view of the forgiveness we've received in Christ. Our willingness to release others is not based on our pathetic self-estimation. It's true forgiveness. It comes from a heart that has been transformed and is being transformed by a growing awareness of the grace of God toward sinners in the cross of Christ. It comes from a life that has been set free from a defense of self. The cross proves unequivocally that there's nothing worth defending.

But we're not left here to despair. The cross also makes sense of our life and its pain. In fact, what we did before Christ is nonsense and what we once considered absurd now makes complete sense. There is nothing in our life out of God's control. The therapeutic perspective can't get here. It can only patch us up and teach us how to walk with a limp. The gospel of sovereign grace transforms us and gives us new legs. It sets us free. All that happens to us—good and bad—presses us deep into the liberating reality of the mysterious cross. Our trials become messengers from God that teach us how to live with the rest of the sinners on this planet. Even our dads.

## ALONE IS HARD TO TAKE

My biological father was a drummer in a rock band. My mom fell hard for him when she was really young. As a result, she never let me get near a drum set. (I think that qualifies as a “mommy wound.”) They ran off together with Springsteen’s “Born to Run” playing in the background of their naïveté. The joyride came to an end with the birth of their first child, my sister. It came off the rails with the birth of their second, me. As soon as my mom could raise enough money she left him to pursue his rock-and-roll fantasy. She was a mom now. That changed everything. He never grew up. Some things never change.

I was too young to know what had happened between them, or care. All I recall of my progenitor was an occasional visit in the summers of my youth. He was a cool customer and drove an even cooler custom van. Just imagine the seventies. He always had some beautiful woman with him who bore a striking resemblance to my mom. He would show up late morning to take my sister and me to lunch. The brief visit would end with a whirlwind trip to Kmart. With the brisk scent of materialism in my face he would confidently announce, “You can have anything you want, except a bike. That’s too expensive.” I settled for the Fonzie action figure with the movable thumb and miniature leather jacket. Then he would drop us off around three o’clock and leave. I had no idea who this guy was and why he bought me stuff. They told me he was my father, but that didn’t make any sense. Weren’t dads supposed to be around? Eventually, those outings came to an end.

I remember my mom being angry on the days he did come. That’s about all I recall. Well, that and the fact that the arm of the Six Million Dollar Man action figure came off, revealing bionics. My mom would sit on the couch at my grandparents’ home watching me play with my new little trinkets and weeping bitterly. She would eventually exit the room with a slam of the door. I would push my glasses up on my nose and stare curiously at the door through my cloudy little lenses. Adults were complicated. I was innocent and clueless. I imagine that’s the only thing that saves a kid in my situation. Truly, for a five-year-old, ignorance is bliss, but short-lived.

I now know what it was about that scene that hurt her so deeply.

Me. There's nothing so sad as a boy without a father. It's like the emotion we have when we see people eating alone in restaurants. Alone is hard to take. Maybe the only thing more regrettable is the son whose father is present but might as well not be. Ultimately, both are alone in this world.

## WHO DOESN'T WANT A FATHER?

Despite the absence of my biological father, I've avoided becoming a statistic. God, in His grace, sent me a replacement dad. Not long after my mom relocated she ran into a childhood friend of her brother's, Victor Yawn. Several years later—after they were married—I was sitting on a wooden bench outside a courtroom, legs swinging back and forth in thick Southern air. Victor came and stood across from me, then squatted so as to look me right in the eyes. He then asked, “Do you want to be my son?” A strange question for a kid who already assumed he was. I looked at him and said, “Yep.” He disappeared into the courtroom. Later that day I was endowed with the worst last name a preacher could ever ask for, Yawn. A name for which I will forever be grateful.

That question is etched in my mind. It is a treasured memory. Imagine a day when the man who's already functioning as your dad makes it official by asking you the most obvious question on the planet. Who doesn't want a father? Believe me, I never took his presence for granted. In some ways I think there are a lot of men with biological children who need to get around to asking this same question. I'm pretty sure how their kids will answer. After all, who doesn't want a father?

Despite the fact I was adopted by him, I didn't realize he was my stepfather until many years later. For many it is the opposite scenario. Despite the fact that sons know who their biological fathers are, they don't actually *know* them. My dad's love was unconditional. This is why I have never referred to him as my stepfather, and bristle when others do. He never gave me a chance to know the difference. This only goes to prove the fact that many men who have kids aren't fathers at all.

Let's be clear. Any beast aroused at the right time with a suitable mate in view can produce an offspring. But only men can be fathers.

Furthermore, it's one thing for a father to be around; it's another thing for a father to be engaged. Obviously, being around is better than not being around, but being engaged is invaluable. One simply fills a role. The other anchors a life. It's obvious when a dad is merely tolerating his kid. No one knows this more than the kid. At the same time, nothing so enlivens the life of a child as a dad who cares. When dad is listening and tracking and caring for his son's soul, the world is a safer place.

It's unnatural for a father to ignore his children. It's cruel. It's a subtle form of abandonment. Kids are satisfied with the smallest crumb that occasionally falls from their father's table. Since most children get very little from their dads, they're content with whatever they get. Hence, "good, but not much." Dads can do the smallest things and effect enormous joy in their children. Just coming home from work is an event. Dads don't just come home. They arrive.

Most dads never notice the deep need for approval their sons carry around. It's potent. One word of encouragement can have a lifetime of effect. It only takes one sentence to change a son's life forever, "Son, I'm proud of you." Those men who've never received this type of approval spend a lifetime working for it. Those who get it have a sense of assurance the rest don't.

No dad is perfect. For the most part King David was a good father. Obviously he had some serious baggage, but he engaged with Solomon, warning his son to avoid the mistakes he made. Yet Solomon ended up the Casanova of the Bible. Then there was Saul—basically the Darth Vader of the Old Testament. Despite his stupidity he had an exemplary son like Jonathan. I guess the point is that so much is dependent on God's grace. You could be the best dad on the planet and still have a bonehead for a son. Or you could be a total failure and have a son who honors you despite your inability to be a father to him.

Some fathers are good at some things, but no father is good at everything. Some things we have to figure out on our own. Those who never had fathers, or had really poor ones, can take some comfort in this fact. Eventually, even those who had ideal relationships with their fathers find themselves in the tangle of their own lives, wishing their father had told them a little bit more.

## A DAD TO THE END

Dr. Victor Yawn and my youngest sister were crossing over a long country road. She was taking him back to the ER. As I recall, he had been watching his granddaughter in a play. They looked both ways down the familiar expanse and then proceeded across. The car that hit them was hidden by a dip in the road. It was a freak accident. In the very moment they turned to see what was coming they could not see it. But, it was coming. When my sister awoke—having been knocked unconscious at impact—he was lying against his seat looking at her. He had been waiting for her. When their eyes met he asked, “Sweetheart, are you okay?” She said, “Yes, Daddy.” He then closed his eyes, lay his head back, and surrendered to the internal injuries that eventually took his life. A dad to the end.

It was a bizarre phone call. “Your dad is not well; you should come home.” I had listened to my dad make the same call to the families of his patients a hundred times. I knew what it meant. This agonizing awareness filled the six-hour ride home. A strange painful anticipation. I knew he was gone. It was the longest ride of my life. I collapsed in tears in the ER parking lot when I finally received the inevitable news.

When I encountered my mom some time later, she asked the most appropriate question I’ve ever heard: “What are we going to do without him?” There’s only one answer to that question: “I don’t know.” Patriarchs are a tough loss. I’ve certainly not done as well as I would have otherwise.

Weeks before, my dad had been at my home in Dallas, Texas, where I was an associate pastor in a Bible church. We played golf, ate greasy food, contemplated life, annoyed our wives, and laughed. Father and son. He held my one-year-old daughter for a photo just before he departed. It hangs on the wall of my home.

In a sublime moment before his departure, which I will never forget, he took me around behind his Suburban. He looked me right in the eyes—no longer needing to squat down—and said, “Son, I’m so proud of you. I’m proud to call you my son. I just wanted you to know that.” Then he left. I remember walking into the house after our encounter and telling my wife, Robin, “God just gave me a tremendous gift. Dad

and I are no longer just father and son; we're friends. Best friends. I love that man." Two weeks later the phone rang.

What comforted me most in the days leading up to and following his funeral was the closure. It was all done. The last thing I ever said to my dad was, "I love you." We so often communicated our love to one another there was nothing I needed to say to him. As I've grown, however, there's plenty I wish he had said to me. I've faced a lot of questions where my impulse was to pick up the phone and call him. There's much more I wish he had said while he was still alive. Wisdom is a precious commodity. There's none so valuable and trustworthy as the wisdom of a father.

In a weird providence, I've been fatherless twice. This fact has caused me to know the value of male influences in my life. I've sought out these influences. I've asked thousands of questions. My dad died when I was twenty-seven. From there to here I have taken careful notes and paid close attention to good fathers and consistent men. I've listened.

I now have three sons of my own. One awaits me in heaven. The two remaining here on earth are affectionately known as "Hammer and Nail." Brothers. A fraternity I never had the privilege of experiencing. I love these boys. These boys love their dad. In many ways I'm a mooring for their lives. In others, they are a mooring for mine. Sons need dads in ways only being a dad makes obvious. All these principles I've picked up are now bombarding their world. Much of it is the content of this book.

I'm afraid for them. This world is brutal, especially for men. It's a grinder. So I try not to waste a moment. I give them every ounce of wisdom I have to give about everything I can imagine. This includes simple and mundane things. Why you should never cut into a steak to see if it's done. Why prevent defense never works. How you swing a hammer by holding it at the end of the handle. Then there are larger realities. Integrity. Love. Sex. Money. I never stop thinking about them and their future wives and kids. But mostly I pray. I know full well I'm a sinner raising sinners. Only God can do what needs to be done in their lives. I'm just an instrument.

The following chapters are some of what I want to say to my sons,

as well as what I wish had been said to me. Principles. They come from various places. Some are hard-earned lessons. I've tried not to waste personal mistakes. As I have had the opportunity to do exit reviews on my blunders, various principles have emerged. My prayer is that what I've learned from my failures can preserve my sons from a similar fate. Other principles are borrowed from the wisdom of men in my life. I've made them my own over the years. They've been invaluable.

As you read, you'll notice gaps—things proved to be valuable in your own life that aren't included. This is inevitable. I've not intended to say *everything* that needed to be said, but only some of what every man wished he had known before. But as you compare notes with me, you should write down your thoughts. In fact, send me your suggestions, and I'll add them to my list. But, more importantly, get up and walk down the hall to your son's room, or pick up the phone to call your son. Tell him yourself. He's been waiting for this moment. Call your dad. Tell him you love him.

I know one day my sons will wish I had told them more than I did. This too is inevitable. Fact is, I can't tell them enough. So much will be up to them. As of now I'm trying—by God's grace—to give my sons the best head start in this life I can. So, I talk to them. I'm engaged. Every night I'm home to put them to bed, without fail I bury my face in theirs and say, "I love you, son. I'm proud to have you as a son." This isn't everything they need to hear, but if it were the last thing they heard from me, there'd be nothing left to say.