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One

# rites AND BLESSINGS

Many civilizations throughout history have celebrated rites of passage, signifying a coming-of-age milestone. There's something in our nature that makes us want to acknowledge a transition from childhood to adulthood. Typically those rites have included three elements: *separation*, *transition*, and subsequent *incorporation*.

In the *separation* phase, the young person is taken from his familiar environment to enter a different and sometimes difficult world. Separation can take many forms: a distant journey, a trial in the wilderness, or just a time away from parents.

During the *transition* phase, the initiate must undergo some sort of change, whether it be a trial of arms, a survival challenge, or increasing responsibility. The transition phase is the time where the participant learns the appropriate behavior for the new stage he is entering. Whatever the transition event is, the person is different when he emerges from what he was when he began.

Finally, during *incorporation*, the young man or woman is welcomed back into the larger society, hopefully as a transformed person with a new sense of purpose and mission. This last phase takes place when the young person is formally admitted into the new role, and it often features a ceremony of some sort.

### Be a Marine!

In a way, my experience in Marine Corps boot camp was a rite of passage. During *separation* I left my family and everything I knew, and I journeyed to Parris Island, South Carolina, the Marine boot camp of legend. Upon getting off the bus to the shouts of Marine drill instructors, I was ushered through a door that read, "Through These Portals Pass Candidates for the World's Finest Fighting Force." I was truly separated, in a world where we recruits could never do anything fast enough or right enough. (I have to confess that early on I found myself asking, *Mama, what have I done?!*) Parris Island is not separated just in the sense that you are cut off from your past; it is literally separated from the US mainland, joined only by a single causeway, guarded by an armed sentry.

During *transition*, I was slowly molded into a US Marine. It was a long, arduous process, with a lot of long days involving hours in the field, in classrooms, and on the "grinder" (that's what Marines called the large parade deck where close-order drill takes place). But slowly, through the three phases of Marine Corps recruit training, I was changing from a civilian with civilian habits into a Marine with Marine habits.

Finally, months later, came the day for graduation, when I would be fully incorporated into the Marine Corps. On that day I was granted the title "US Marine" for the first time. (During boot camp, we were called only "recruit," "private," or

words I can't repeat here, but never "Marine." That title had to be earned). On that day of *incorporation* I joined a fighting force with a rich, two-hundred-year tradition and the esprit de corps and camaraderie that comes with it. I was now a member of something much larger than myself, with an entire tradition of honor, courage, and commitment to uphold. Equally important to me was the moment when I was also reintroduced to the welcoming embrace of my family.

### Becoming a Man in Sparta

Other cultures throughout the centuries have incorporated rites of passage that bring their young people—usually boys—into the wider world of that culture. In ancient warrior cultures such as Sparta, Greece, this rite was brutal, and sometimes the young man didn't survive. The separation phase began early, usually when the boy was only about seven. He was trained in the art of war and lived under severe, sparse conditions (hence our word *spartan*, meaning harsh, tough, devoid of luxury). During those years he learned discipline and physical and mental toughness.

Once he reached age eighteen, the young man was given only a knife and sent into the wilderness to survive by his strength and wits. Those who survived until age twenty were finally welcomed into the full ranks of the Spartan military, where they served until age thirty. The Spartan rite of passage prepared a young man for the thing most prized by the culture of Sparta: the warrior's life.

### How Maasai Youth Become Men

Such rites of passage still continue today. They feature similar themes, but are more directly tied to contributing to the

wider society. Jerry Moritz, a retired US Navy chaplain who spends many summers ministering to the Maasai tribe of Africa, relates their rite of passage.<sup>1</sup> The Maasai are a seminomadic pastoral people whose territory covers southern Kenya and parts of Tanzania. Their entire culture centers on their cattle, their source of food and their measure of wealth. They surround their villages with high barriers of acacia bushes with inch-long thorns that no lion, leopard, hyena, or even elephant can breach. At night they drive their livestock into the compound to protect them from predators. But the cattle must have room to range, so during the day they are herded onto the African veldt. There their main enemy is the lion. For obvious reasons, then, the Maasai rite of passage revolves around a lion hunt.

When young Maasai boys reach the age of fourteen or fifteen, they are taken out into the bush by the *morans*—the warriors of a particular family group. The *morans* form a circle around a male lion, the young man is given a shield and a spear, and he is ushered into the circle with the lion. These initiations are very fluid and fast-moving. It's young boys against a wily predator that is stronger and faster than they. Moreover, the lion feels trapped by the circle of warriors and becomes even more dangerous. The boy must kill the lion before the lion kills him. If there is a group of boys undergoing the initiation, according to tradition, the first boy to throw his spear and wound the lion gets the credit for the kill. If the lion evades efforts and then attacks the boy, the warriors will come to his defense and kill the lion, but the boy has not passed the rite.

If a young man successfully kills the lion, he is considered successful in the rite of passage and becomes a *moran*. But he is not finished. He must separate himself from the larger group for a time. He lives out in the bush for six to eight years and lives off the land. Sometimes he will link up with other new

*morans* who have successfully gone through the same rite. They are allowed to kill the occasional goat or a cow for food, even though it may belong to another Maasai group. During this time a new *moran* also looks for a wife. He may go into a Maasai compound, go to any of the huts, and thrust his spear into the ground inside the hut. The woman in the hut, according to tradition, then becomes his wife. Once the new *moran* has completed his time out in the bush, he returns to his village and is considered an elder among the Maasai. The Maasai rite of passage prepares the young man to receive all the skills and courage needed to become a protector of his people.

## The Meaning of the Bar Mitzvah

Another rite of passage perhaps more familiar to readers is the Jewish bar mitzvah, which literally means “son of the commandment.” The variant for girls is bat mitzvah, with *bat* meaning “daughter.” Jewish tradition states that until the age for this rite, children are under their father’s authority and not directly responsible to God for keeping His commandments. Upon becoming a bar or bat mitzvah, though, the child is responsible directly to God for keeping the law.

Technically, the term refers to the child who is coming of age—thirteen for boys, twelve for girls—not to the ceremony itself. However, you are just as likely to hear that someone is “having a bar mitzvah” or “invited to a bar mitzvah.” No bar mitzvah ceremony is actually needed. A Jewish boy or girl automatically becomes a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah upon reaching the appropriate age. The bar or bat mitzvah ceremony is not mentioned in the Jewish Talmud and is a relatively modern innovation. The receptions or parties that are commonplace after the bar or bat mitzvah today were unheard of as recently as a century ago.

There is a special religious significance to being bar or bat mitzvah. Under Jewish law, children are not obligated to observe the commandments, although they are encouraged to do so as much as possible to learn the obligations they will have as adults. Once of age, though, children must observe the commandments. The bar mitzvah ceremony formally and publicly marks the assumption of that obligation, along with the corresponding right to take part in leading religious services, to count in a *minyan* (the minimum number of people needed to perform certain religious services), to form binding contracts, to testify before religious courts, and to marry.

In its earliest and most basic form, a bar mitzvah is the celebrant's first *aliyah*, i.e., reading from the Torah in Hebrew or reciting a blessing over the reading during services, which is considered an honor. Today, it is common practice for the bar mitzvah celebrant to do more than just say the blessing. It is most common for the celebrant to learn the entire *haftarah* portion (the reading of the prophets), including its traditional chant. In some congregations, the celebrant reads the entire weekly Torah portion, leads part of the service, or leads the congregation in certain important prayers. The celebrant is also generally required to make a speech, which begins with the phrase, "Today, I am a man." The father traditionally recites a blessing. In modern times, the religious service is followed by a celebration that is often as elaborate as a wedding reception.

For the bat mitzvah, in some Jewish practices the girls perform essentially the same ceremony as the boys. In more conservative wings of Judaism, though, women are not permitted to participate in religious services in these ways, so a bat mitzvah, if celebrated at all, is usually little more than a party. The bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah prepares the young man or woman to be a full member of a Jewish family and congregation, accountable to both his family and to God.

## Granting the Blessing

### The Blessing in the Old Testament

From Judaism we also get the idea of sending our young people into the world with a blessing from God, a priest, a patriarch, or one's father. The biblical blessing takes many forms, but a key idea in blessing is to set aside someone or something for a special, holy purpose. It can also mean to praise or glorify as well as to keep and protect.

An early blessing is found in Genesis 14:18–19 (NIV), where Melchizedek blesses Abram (soon to become Abraham): “Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth.’” It was a way of calling down God's favor on Abram and acknowledging God's provision in the past (victory in battle) and in the future (God's covenant with Abraham).

Another blessing is found in Genesis 48, as Jacob lies dying. His entire family is reunited, and he knows his long-lost son, Joseph, has had God's special calling upon him. And because of the promise God had made to Jacob through his grandfather and father, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob is determined to pass this blessing not just to his own sons, but to Joseph's sons born when he was in Egypt: Ephraim and Manasseh.

[Jacob] blessed Joseph and said, “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has delivered me from all evil, bless the lads; and may my name live on in them, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.” (Genesis 48:15–16)



Not only does the mention of Abraham and Isaac connect Jacob's faith in God to his immediate forefathers, but it also helps tie together the faith of the earliest patriarchs in Genesis—those who were said to have walked with God—with that of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It harkens back to past blessings and becomes a continuation of those blessings to future generations. It is a confirmation and promise of God's faithfulness.

Another blessing for future generations can be found in the so-called blessing of Moses, found in Deuteronomy 33:1–29. Here the patriarch pronounces blessings on the tribes of Israel, reminding them that it was God's provision and love that has blessed them.

### The Blessing of Jesus

Perhaps the most important blessing in the Bible is found in the accounts of Jesus' baptism in the first three Gospels (Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22). John the Baptist had been preparing the way for the Messiah, baptizing people with water, but he promised that another, greater than he, would soon come. One day Jesus Himself came to John and said it was proper for Him to be baptized, "to fulfill all righteousness." Upon coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven opened and the spirit of God, in the form of a dove descending upon Him. And God's voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:15, 17 NIV).

This statement directly from God was His blessing on His Son, the promised Messiah. It marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, with God clearly communicating to His Son that He was sent forth with His Father's praise and with His blessing.

Interestingly, Jesus' first recorded experience after being sent on His mission with His Father's blessing was His temp-

tation in the wilderness of the desert. That wilderness was associated not only with demonic activity, but it also was the place where Israel faced her greatest testing.

## The Benefits of Blessing Your Child

The blessing that concludes a rite of passage gives security and comfort to your children as they get ready for adulthood. You are their advocate. They have your support and all that goes with it. A lot of men lack confidence because they never had the support of their fathers. There's something special about the public acknowledgment of the father for the son.

A blessing on a daughter is equally important. Many girls get off track in life because their relationship with their father was disconnected. And seeing a father as a man leading a life of integrity sets up a daughter to do the same. The father sets an example in her mind of what it means to be a man. . . and hopefully a godly man. It makes a father want to be a lot more guarded in living a life with Christ.

By giving this blessing to his son and daughter, the father sets up the son and daughter for a head start in life, avoiding mistakes that many young adults make. In contrast, a child's maturity often is stunted by the broken relationship with the father.

Giving your children a formal blessing is similar to Israel's blessing on his sons, calling out each child and giving a specific blessing that acknowledges each child's adulthood and conveys your support. There will be other opportunities to express your love, but this day presents a special opportunity to affirm your children. (For specifics on the prayer of blessing, see the end of chapter 2.)

## What to Include in Your Child's Rite of Passage

From Jesus' desert experience we can learn some important things to include, literally or figuratively, in the rites we use for our children. In Jesus' case, His desert sojourn was a literal separation from civilization. The Judean wilderness is a barren land. It is not a sandy desert like you might see in the movies; rather, it is a wasteland of rocks and boulders, steep drop-offs, and yawning caverns: no water, no plant life—nothing. But Jesus was not totally alone. He had fellowship with his Father and the Spirit, and He had the Word of God in His heart.

### Separation

So here's lesson one: The *separation* phase must include some spiritual aspect. The separation does not have to be a literal wilderness—any sense of being taken out of the normal day-to-day world should suffice. The key is that the separation focuses on your child's spiritual being. It cannot be wilderness adventure solely for the sake of wilderness adventure.

Here's lesson two: Any rite of passage must be grounded in God's Word, and there should be ample use of it throughout. Jesus would be repeatedly tempted; each time, He referred to God's Word in response.

### Transition

Jesus' time in the wilderness was a time of *transition*. He was moving from His life as a young Jewish carpenter toward the ministry His Father had prepared for Him. Jesus knew what His ultimate mission was: to suffer and die for our sins. Being fully God yet fully human, He was able to be tempted, which is what Satan had prepared for Him.

The Devil offered Jesus three temptations to turn away from the Cross. There are various interpretations as to why Satan tested Jesus with these three particular things—turning stones into bread, being saved from certain death from a high fall, and being given all the kingdoms of the world. In some ways these temptations experienced by Christ are similar to those mentioned in 1 John 2:16 (the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life). John Wesley defines them in his commentary:

The desire of the flesh—the pleasure of the outward senses, whether of the taste, smell, or touch. The desire of the eye—the pleasures of imagination, to which the eye chiefly is subservient; of that internal sense whereby we relish whatever is grand, new, or beautiful. The pride of life—all that pomp in clothes, houses, furniture, equipage, manner of living, which generally procure honor from the bulk of mankind, and so gratify pride and vanity. It therefore directly includes the desire of praise, and, remotely, covetousness. All these desires are not from God, but from the prince of this world.<sup>2</sup>

These are three battlegrounds our children will face as well. We need to prepare them for the right response. Therefore, any rite of passage must be grounded in God's Word.

Finally, wrap up your rite of passage with your own form of feasting, whether it be a family meal at home or a fancy outing in a restaurant. After Satan failed in his attempts to short-circuit Jesus' mission, he left, and angels then ministered to Jesus. This was a way of being reincorporated into the world, and also a time of celebration.

## Incorporation

For your son or daughter, this time of celebration and sharing is a final grace note to tell the young man or woman that they are now part of a larger society. It's a way of welcoming them into the fellowship. This is *incorporation*. With your son or daughter seated in a chair, all of the adult participants surround your son or daughter and pray on their behalf. Then you conclude by praying the blessing upon your child as those partners stand as witnesses. The prayer of blessing should take place at the end of the ceremony of passage. It is the climax, the last thing your child will hear as you conclude the rite of passage.

Such a ceremony is neither frivolous nor empty of meaning. When we lead our children into their rite of passage and bestow a blessing, we help deliver them from our age's own form of wilderness. Today we live in a society that has various ideas about what it means to come of age. On a basic level, the world tells young people they've made this transition to adulthood when they leave their mom and dad's home, join the military, or enter college. More ominously, the world tells our young people that they have gone through their rite of passage when they've drunk their first beer, smoked their first cigarette, participated in sexual activity, gotten a tattoo, or used various other ways of rebelling against God and/or their parents.

Too often, there is no rite or no celebration of entering adulthood at all. *Too often, our young people simply drift into adulthood with no sense of commission or blessing from their society or their families.*

I believe as Christian parents we are charged to make clear for our kids when the time comes for their rite of passage. As with other cultures, I think our rite of passage has to be deliberate—something the child knows will happen at a certain time. It should not be a surprise that it will happen, although

elements of the ceremony itself can be kept secret until the proper time.

## The Celebration

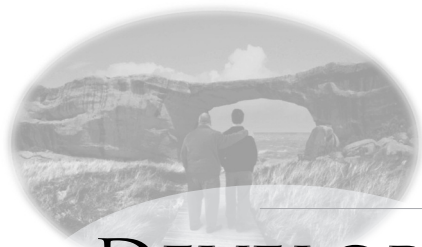
The rite ends with celebration. Celebrate with a meal full of good conversation among the adults. Let your child listen and invite him to participate. Now he is among the adults . . . he is an adult in your eyes and his. You are sending him or her forth with an explicit blessing that ties into the family heritage, God's trustworthiness, and His provision. Enjoy the food and fun. Let your child sense that you as parents are well pleased with him or her.

The Spartans' rite prepared their boys to be warriors—or to die trying. The Maasai prepare their boys to become men who defend their families, their herds, and their way of life. Jews mark the time that a child is considered accountable to God and His commandments, and therefore are also eligible for certain rights and responsibilities of adulthood. Significantly, the bar or bat mitzvah receives a blessing from their father, a sense that he calls down God's well-being and protection on them as they enter the world.

A personal blessing can be very powerful. As Brian Moli-  
tor, author of *Boy's Passage, Man's Journey*, writes:

In the deepest sense, we bless someone when we speak words of encouragement and affirmation to him or her. To consider that our words can actually be used to set our sons and daughters apart for holy purposes is truly awesome. A timely, well-chosen word from a parent can encourage, enlighten, strengthen, and safeguard a child against the assaults against him or her that will inevitably come.<sup>3</sup>





Two

## DEVELOPING THE IDEA

The boys of Sparta and Massai, and the modern bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies for Jewish boys and girls offered me helpful illustrations of rites of passage. From these cultural examples and other material I've read, I began to develop a rite of passage for my own children that would begin with *separation*, include a time of *transition*, and conclude with *incorporation*. Finally and most importantly, I wanted the rite to end with a sense of spiritual mission and a father's blessing with a unique Christian emphasis.

Through such rites, your and my children are able to feel they belong to something larger than themselves. That's a need all our sons and daughters have. Your children's rite of passage prepares them to recognize they are men and women with purpose and mission.

For me, I realized my boys would need to symbolically separate from me for a time, and that time would need a sense of adventure—but without the danger of a Spartan spear or a



lion's claws! They would need a process of transition, the sense that they were moving from one thing to another, and there needed to be a learning process along the way—just as the Spartan and Maasai boys learned skills to help them survive not just the rite but their future lives in those cultures. The rite would need to end with a ceremony of incorporation, where they would be welcomed back and ushered into a larger “family” that would include not just their parents or siblings but also a group of men who would be their mentors and accountability partners, not just for a time, but for their whole lives.

### Finding the Participants

I wanted to set a specific date and time when I would recognize my boys as men in their father's eyes. I wanted to set a specific date and time when I would recognize each of my girls as women in their father's eyes. This would not be a spur-of-the-moment activity or something I just drifted into. It needed to be deliberate, with a specific plan.

For my boys, I also wanted to have a specific group of people, godly men whom Buddy and Tommy already knew and could call on for support. I wanted participation by those who had significant influence in the lives of my children, people who spoke to them spiritually—maybe a pastor, a youth pastor, a mentor, and/or an accountability-group partner. It would need to be men whom I could count on in the future when my children would need wise counseling. This last part is important: *The Enemy is always trying to isolate us*. It's his way to kill and destroy by having us listen to only our own voice and not seek counsel.

Over and over in God's Word it tells us there is wisdom in many counselors (e.g., Proverbs 11:14). God would put these men in my boys' lives to be those many counselors, to

help them as iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17). The only exception I ever made to that was for the grandparents, who would talk specifically about family. (That, by the way, would be a great opportunity for witnessing to the grandparents or a key older family member—say, a patriarch or matriarch. If they are not saved, this rite of passage is a great process for them to be a part of, to join us in launching our children into adulthood.)

These men would come alongside Sheila and me and advise our sons. Similarly, chosen women would come alongside our daughters with advice and comfort. Each counselor would need to be someone the children would feel comfortable going to in times of crisis and who would give them sound, spiritual advice. In short, I looked for four or five key influencers in their lives—influencers for Christ. The rite itself would be a call to live a righteous life in obedience to our Lord and would be setting them on the right path for the future, a blessing in front of others, acknowledging them and encouraging them to live their lives for Christ.

My goal was to do this for each of my children on their sixteenth birthdays. With three of the four, I was able to make that goal. (My oldest daughter, Victoria, was twenty-one when we did her rite of passage.) I don't think there's any special significance to that particular age, by the way. A child can be older or younger. In fact, you might even consider different rites for different life stages.

## Marking the Milestones

The Focus on the Family book *Spiritual Milestones* recommends several points at which you can intentionally mark a milestone in a child's life, based on his or her life development. For example, in addition to a baby dedication and then

baptism, the authors suggest a “preparing for adolescence” rite around the time the child turns eleven; purity vows around age thirteen; a rite of passage around age fifteen; and the child’s high school graduation around age eighteen.<sup>1</sup>

However, I thought sixteen was significant because by the time a child has reached the age of sixteen, he or she is facing a lot of life’s greatest challenges. And, at least for girls, age sixteen already has a connotation of moving on to bigger things. It’s a time of Sweet Sixteen parties and, in some circles, debutante balls. You know your children best, though, and can judge best when would be the right time to commit to such a ceremony. As I said earlier, this is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all process.

## Highlighting the Topics

As I began to refine the idea, I came up with six key topics around which to develop parts of the rite of passage. I recommend them to you:

- Faith
- Hope
- Love
- Purity
- Integrity
- Family

### Faith

Faith carries two meanings in the Bible: The first is that of trust and reliance (Romans 3:3). The second sense is of fidelity and trustworthiness. In the Old Testament the verb “to believe” occurs only thirty times, but don’t conclude that a relative lack of mention means that faith is not important in the Old

Testament. After all, the New Testament draws all its examples of faith from the lives of Old Testament believers (e.g., Romans 4:18; Hebrews 11; James 2:14), and Paul rests his doctrine of faith on the word of Habakkuk 2:4, "The righteous will live by his faith." New Testament writers, especially the apostle Paul and the writer of Hebrews, show that the faith manifested by Old Testament saints, as first mentioned in reference to Abraham, was no different from that expected of today's believers. Paul makes clear that the meaning of faith is trust in the person of Jesus, the truth of His teaching, and the redemptive work He accomplished on the cross. Faith is more than just intellectual assent to the doctrinal teachings of Christianity.

Genuine faith is born out of knowledge of the will of God and exists only to fulfill that will. The objective of faith is the will of God. Faith is not a means of getting man's will done in heaven; it is the means of getting God's will done on earth. Faith does not put God at our beck and call; rather it puts us at His. It is for "official use only," and is operational only within the sphere of His will.<sup>2</sup>

A personal faith in Christ would be the most important thing to communicate to my children through this rite of passage. I commend that focus to you. It is the cornerstone upon which you should build all other parts of the rite. A personal faith means living in radical and total commitment to Christ as the Lord of one's life.

I wanted each of my children to come away from this day with an understanding that faith is not something easily lived; there are so many opportunities to drift or even to doubt. I wanted to communicate that, without faith, everything else would be much harder.

## Hope

Hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit that, along with faith and love, is an essential characteristic of the Christian (1 Corinthians 13:8, 13). In the Old Testament, the word *hope* is often used in the sense of “trust” or “confidence.” The New Testament speaks of hope this way, as well as in the sense of expectation and desire; it includes confidence that God will be true to His Word (Romans 15:13). And our hope of glory is in Christ and His work (Colossians 1:27; 1 Timothy 1:1).

Hope is linked with faith (Hebrews 11:1) because it depends on Jesus’ resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:19). We need our children to understand this: The faith that is so important to their lives leads naturally to having this great hope that God is faithful and will, through His Word and wise counselors, be a steady guide for the journey into adulthood and beyond.

## Love

The Bible tells us that love is the very nature of God (1 John 4:8, 16) and the greatest of the Christian virtues (1 Corinthians 13:13). It is essential to man’s relations to God and to his fellow man (Mark 12:28–31; John 13:34–35). When the disciples asked Jesus to identify the greatest commandment, He said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’ This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:37–38 NIV).

This ultimate expression of love, loving God with our whole being, is for us what C. S. Lewis called “Need-love,” the love that leads us to cry out in desire and need for God. As he wrote in *The Four Loves*:

Every Christian would agree that a man’s spiritual health is exactly proportional to his love for God. But man’s love for God, from the very nature of the case, must always be

very largely, and must often be entirely, a Need-love. This is obvious when we implore forgiveness for our sins or support in our tribulations. But in the long run it is perhaps even more apparent in our growing—for it ought to be growing—awareness that our whole being by its very nature is one vast need; incomplete, preparatory, empty yet cluttered, crying out for Him who can untie things that are now knotted together and tie up things that are still dangling loose. . . . And God will have it so. He addresses our Need-love: “Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy-laden.”<sup>3</sup>

It is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8–10). Love found its supreme expression in Christ’s self-sacrifice on Calvary (1 John 4:10). Of course, love has several meanings that are not fully captured by the single word in English: There’s *storge*, the natural affection felt between parents and children; also *philia*, the brotherly love felt between strong friends; *eros*, the physical aspect of love, particularly sexual; and *agape*, the self-sacrificing, self-giving type of love exemplified by Christ and His sacrificial death for us but also encouraged in all Christians toward both friends and enemies.

As parents, we should desire that our children understand what it means to love another but also understand it biblically, not from what our popular culture and Hollywood tell them. I wanted my children to know about love of family, love of friends, the physical love of another sanctioned within marriage, but most importantly, the sacrificial love we are commanded to exemplify. I also wanted them to understand love as that most important virtue of desiring God, of knowing our utter helplessness and need before Him and His loving-kindness in being the object of all our faith and hope.

## PARTNERS *in the* PASSAGE

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MY HUSBAND AND MY KIDS, and now our grand-kids, are the most special gifts that God has given me.

My prayer has always been to be a good wife and mother. I always pray for my children. I have prayed for their salvation, for their walk with the Lord to become stronger and stronger every day, and for them to mature to be the godly men (fathers) and godly women (mothers) that God created them to be.

I think taking them through these rites of passage was another stepping stone in their walk in their faith in Christ. It shows them that they are not in it alone, no matter where this life takes them or what life has to offer. There are people in their lives who are willing to help them through the good times as well as the hard.

They may not have fully understood everything that was going on that special day, but I know as their faith grows and their families grow, their individual rite of passage will become more and more meaningful and special to them. And I pray that when their children reach the age for the time of their own rite of passage, it will be even more special to them as they send their children into the world to be godly young men and women.

One of the hardest things to do is to say, "Okay, God, they are yours," and take your hands off. The truth is they were always His. Our job is to teach them and guide them in His truth. Their job is to obey. This is one thing along their life's

journey that helps them get a good, strong start into knowing who they are in Christ and how much we love them and that there are others standing in the gap for them.

—*Sheila McBride*

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## Purity

Purity is more than just sexual abstinence until marriage. It involves an entire lifestyle and habit of mind. We need to help our children make commitments to purity during their teen years, so they will be ready for temptations during both their teen and adult years.

There is no doubt about where God stands on the subject. The apostle Paul wrote, “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9–10 ESV). He added, “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:13, 18 ESV). The New Testament contains many other warnings against engaging in sexual immorality (Galatians 5:19–21; 1 Thessalonians 4:3–5; Ephesians 5:1–3, 5). And in our sex-obsessed world, it takes more than our best efforts to maintain sexual purity. It takes the redeeming and sanctifying work of God in our lives.

Remember, your child’s sexual purity involves more than just their sexual behavior. What they allow into their minds, what thoughts they dwell on, the images they view, and the words they hear all influence them. Sexual purity involves



what they read, what movies and TV they watch, what music they listen to, what conversations they listen to or take part in. As the apostle Paul tells all followers of Christ, “Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you” (2 Corinthians 6:17 NIV, echoing Isaiah 52:11). But today’s society is obsessed with sex and has become increasingly tolerant of sexual expression in all its forms. Followers of Christ, on the other hand, are called to be a holy people, to live lives that set us apart from the world, keeping apart from the unclean things.

The psalmist says, “I will set no worthless thing before my eyes” (Psalm 101:3). I wanted to find someone who could speak to my children about purity as a lifestyle, as a habit of mind, as something that pleases God, not just in the physical, sexual sense, but also in how they live their everyday lives. Purity is about being pure in word and deed, which leads to the next topic.

## Integrity

Integrity is based on truth, not just in the sense of something being factually true, but also true in the sense of being straight and trustworthy. When Moses (Exodus 18:21) refers to “able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain,” he’s talking about integrity of character—a kind of reliability and personal behavior that imply a love of truth, truth derived from the character of God (Hebrews 6:18; 2 Timothy 2:13; Titus 1:2). Integrity also implies being whole and sound, able to function as designed, as in, “The engineers testify to the integrity of the bridge.” The bridge’s integrity means it is strong and won’t fall down. The same type of integrity can be applied to people: a love of truth, trustworthiness, being a man or woman of their word, functioning as

God would have us function—as a bridge functions as the engineers would have it function.

Pastor and author Warren Wiersbe describes the man and woman of integrity this way: “A person with integrity is not divided (that’s duplicity) or merely pretending (that’s hypocrisy). He or she is ‘whole’; life is ‘put together’, harmoniously. People with integrity have nothing to hide and nothing to fear. Their lives are open books. They are integers.”<sup>4</sup>

Integrity is a whole-life pursuit. We need to prepare our children for this walk—a walk of consistency that will affect every area of their lives. Even before the rite of passage, we as parents can model this walk. That means showing integrity in every area of our lives. I cannot show integrity as a businessman and then come home and lie to my wife and children. I cannot be forthright with my family and then lie to my friends. The character trait and habit of mind that would lead me to show a lack of integrity in one thing would naturally bleed over into other areas of life. I cannot be a liar at work and somehow expect to mentally shift gears and become a straight shooter at home or at church.

For that reason, during the rite I wanted to communicate to my children that being a man or woman of integrity is a full-time job and would count toward much as they enter the world of adulthood. Even though we see so many people with no integrity who seem to do well (Jeremiah 12:1), having integrity is its own reward and pleases God.

As your rite reminds them about integrity, be sure they know that integrity lost is hard to regain. Better to never lose it in the first place. But to not lose it, they need to understand what it is and how to guard it.

## Family

For their rite of passage, I wanted my children to know the importance of being part of a family. Family is where we are raised, where we often can be introduced to godly living and raised in the truth of God's Word. Your relationships with your parents and siblings are different from those you have with friends, classmates, or coworkers. I've heard family described as "where they always have to take you in." You can cease to be friends with someone, classmates graduate and move on, and coworkers leave for other jobs, but your father will always be your father and your brother will always be your brother.

Family is also a picture of the relationship between God and His people. In the Old Testament, the relationship between God and Israel is seen in such family terms as "bride" (Jeremiah 2:2 NIV), "daughter" (Jeremiah 31:22), "children" (Jeremiah 3:14 ESV), or "betroth" (Hosea 2:19). The New Testament uses bridal imagery to describe the relationship between Christ and the church (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:25–33; Revelation 19:7; 21:9), and the church is referred to as the household of God (Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19; 3:15; 1 Peter 4:17).

A lot of the problems in our world come from the fragmentation of the family. Easy divorce and multiple marriages have children bouncing from one home to the next, and sometimes competing loyalties between parents leave the child hurt and confused. I realize that some readers of this book have probably gone through a divorce and perhaps have remarried. I don't mean to condemn, as I understand many times in this age of no-fault separation that a spouse can find himself or herself divorced without wanting to. I realize also that for some that was their life before they came to Christ, and now they want to make good. No matter what your circumstances, if you're reading this book, understand that my most impor-

tant message is that it's never too late. (See the last chapter for a great story on that.)

When it is time for your child's rite of passage, remember that the family portion of the rite can be performed only by someone within the family: a grandparent, parent, aunt, uncle, or perhaps an older sibling. In our case, I knew my father would be the right man for the task. I wanted to communicate what it meant to be a McBride, to talk about the family history, the legacy of the family, and the importance of understanding that they are links in the family heritage, for good or ill, and it was important to make sure they were strong links to continue the McBride name.

## Final Preparation

This rite should take place in a special environment, a setting that is unique. For our children, it consisted of several stops, or "stations," where they would meet a different adult mentor, who would address one of the chosen topics. For the boys I wanted to add a bit of adventure during the separation phase, so I looked for a trail through the woods. For the girls I looked for a trip through the interior of our church, including the altar, where one day they might be married and start their families. I wanted to have them take away from that special experience, through each person they talked to, spiritual characteristics for their lives as well as a gift at each station that would remind them of that important day with its commitments and challenges.

At each station they would be learning things that would help them transition from being young men and women to adults. Both events would end up at a nice, formal luncheon, the incorporation phase where they would be symbolically

reunited with their families but also welcomed into a fellowship of lifelong mentors.

### Finding Special Men

I thought of men the boys and I knew who could speak to them about each of these topics. I recommend not telling your child much about the event ahead of time. As I was planning and praying for the first rite, I never mentioned anything to Buddy, my oldest son. The only preparation he got was being told to schedule time for the event on a Saturday morning in the near future.

The secrecy is important: I think there is something special for all of us when we realize that someone has done a whole lot of planning to do something special for us. Bringing in the mentors was part of that calculation. In the end, the kids realized, "Hey, there are people here who drove a long way to be here for this time with me, there are people who flew in to be a part of this, and this didn't just come together this morning. There was a lot of planning that has gone into preparing this event for me today." That makes the event all the more special.

Ideally the mentors you choose should all have been involved at some point in your child's life. For Buddy, I chose a football coach, a youth pastor, an uncle, a grandfather. I talked with each participant in advance to see if he had a passion or felt he had a message on one of the selected topics and asked him to pray about the specific message for my son. For your children, perhaps a favorite teacher, an older brother or sister, or a Bible-study leader would make good mentors. The important thing to consider is the relationship the mentor already has with the child and the likelihood that this person would be able or even wish to be available to provide wise counsel in the future.

## Finding Unique Gifts

With a topic assigned to each man, we looked at gifts for each of those topics. The gifts should be important reminders of God's faithfulness and help. They become a form of Ebenezer—memorial stones, of sorts, things that they would hold on to and they would cherish and remember. In 1 Samuel 7:12, Samuel placed a large stone at the spot somewhere between Mizpah and Shen, where God had delivered victory over the Philistines—a place where twice earlier the Israelites had been routed by the same enemy. That stone would serve as a marker and permanent reminder of God's help. Samuel called it Ebenezer, meaning "stone of help." As my children went on through life, I hoped they would look back at the gifts and remember the message and be able to reflect on how it had helped them become better adults.

The gifts were directly tied to the topic. For example, the speaker on integrity would give a Bible. He would talk about being a man of integrity and how you can't be a man of integrity without the Word of God. For faith there was a print-out of a shield that had quotes about faith. For the family station my father would give a family heirloom, something that had belonged to his grandfather or his great-grandfather. The subject of purity called for a purity ring. As a wedding ring symbolizes the marriage bond between a husband and wife, a purity ring symbolizes the wearer's status as not yet married but remaining sexually pure for his or her future spouse. Again, you might have different ideas for appropriate gifts, things that are unique to your family or to your child. Use your imagination, and brainstorm with your spouse as the two of you pray through the planning of your child's rite of passage event. The important thing is that the gift is meaningful and appropriate to serve as a lifelong reminder of the event and the lesson.

After the main event, I planned for all of us to go somewhere for a meal to share a time of fellowship, but it was also when I would present the final gift—from me. It would be a summary of all that had gone before on that day and a remembrance, an Ebenezer for the rest of their lives. While I stress flexibility in planning your child's rite of passage, I do believe strongly that some sort of meal or other time of relaxing fellowship should be a part of wrapping up the process. First, it's just fun. Second, I believe it provides a forum for everyone who has contributed to the rite to be together to share experiences and insights and, as a body, to commemorate the occasion and commission the young man and woman.

At the meal, I planned to give each of my boys the final, key gift: a sword as a reminder that their only true weapon in the inevitable spiritual battles they would face would be the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17). (Besides, I don't know too many boys who object to being given a real sword!) For the girls, it would be a crown, as a noble wife is a crown to her husband (Proverbs 12:4). (It would also signify their status as my special princesses!)

And I had thought about the blessing I would pray over them. This would be an original prayer based on Psalm 1:1–3 and Psalm 37:3–4. You can see how this worked during the rite of passage for our older son, Buddy, in the next chapter. As part of the blessing, I prayed that as Buddy delighted in pleasing God and His Word he would flourish as a tree planted by the waters and have a fruitful life.

John Trent and Gary Smalley's classic *The Blessing* includes many examples of blessings you can use. It's important that you give a genuine, heartfelt prayer, based on the Scripture and what you feel in your heart. Have the meal, with conversation, then clear the table, affirm each participant, let the child make the commitment, give a key gift, and then have everyone pray

for the child individually. Finally, you as the parent pray a blessing.

For me, the only thing left to do was make final preparations for the first rite of passage with my eldest son, Buddy.