

Introduction to the How to Find God Series

Life is a journey, and finding and knowing God is fundamental to that journey. When a new child is born, when we approach marriage, and when we find ourselves facing death—either in old age or much earlier—it tends to concentrate the mind. We shake ourselves temporarily free from absorption in the whirl of daily life and ask the big questions of the ages:

First Birth

*Born to raise us from the earth;
Born to give us second birth.*

—“HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING,”

CHARLES WESLEY

The Christian faith teaches that every person should experience two births. In one's first birth you are born into the natural world. Then, in what Charles Wesley calls our “second birth,” which Jesus himself describes as being “born again” (John 3:3), we are born into the kingdom of God and receive new

spiritual life. The first birth is ours because God is our Creator; the second birth can be ours because God is also our Redeemer. The Lord is the author of both.

In light of this, we want to consider the spiritual issues surrounding both births. What does it mean to receive a new human life from God? What are the responsibilities of the family and the church to newborns? How can we help our children who are with us through the first birth come to experience the second birth?

Fearful and Wonderful

Rather than directly creating each new human being himself, the Lord bestowed on the union of male and female the unique power to bring new human beings into the world. No wonder

then that newborn babies in the Bible are always regarded with wonder as signs of God's blessing. The original charge of God to the human race was: "Be fruitful, and multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28). While God does not demand that all people be married, as Jesus himself and Saint Paul demonstrate, nevertheless, Genesis 1:28 explains why we feel so deeply that we are witnessing a miracle of God when gazing on a newborn child. Psalm 127:3 says that *all* children are a "reward" from God.

But there is another side to it.

God often sends heroes and deliverers into the world by giving them as newborns to couples who are disconsolate because they cannot have children. So Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samson, and Samuel are all born to women who previously could not conceive. And yet a quick survey of their lives, particularly those of Jacob, Joseph,

and Samson, reveals that these children, who were direct “gifts of God,” were also great heart-griefs to their parents.

Something of this is seen in this famous passage in Psalm 139:13–16: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am *fearfully and wonderfully* made . . . Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book.” As one Bible scholar put it: “Our pre-natal fashioning by God [is] a powerful reminder of the value He sets on us, even as embryos, and of His planning our end from the beginning.”¹

The phrase we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” is full of interest. Every baby born into the world is a wonderful creation, but at the same time a frightening one. Anyone who looks

on a newborn—realizing this is a new human life in the image of the Creator, come into the world along with particular gifts and callings and a life planned by the Lord of history—must respond with a kind of fear and trembling. And no one should behold a child with more awe and fear than the child’s parents.

When Kathy and I brought home our first-born, I was surprised to see her cuddle him close and weep. Partly this was her hormones talking, she said, but partly it was a recognition of what we had let this tiny little person in for as a member of a fallen race. Yes, “all the days ordained for him” were “written in God’s book,” but as an adult she knew that our son’s book would contain disappointment, hurt, failure, pain, loss, and ultimately his own death. All this would happen no matter how hard we would try to

shield him. So she literally trembled before the responsibility of being a parent to this wonder of the universe. And when I thought about it, so did I.

Kathy concluded:

The birth of a child has been referred to by one mother as a “family-quake.” Whether it is joyful and desired or not, the first or fourteenth, healthy or challenged, a new person entering the world alters history in ways both large and small just by reason of his or her existence. As a new parent, you have entered a fellowship stretching back millennia, one that includes queens and slaves, thirteen-year-olds in ancient cultures and at least one ninety-year-old mother, Sarah, mother of Isaac, in the Bible. Every

kingdom, tribe, tongue, and nation has its rituals surrounding giving birth, and for a reason. It is a near-mystical event, welcoming a person who was not-there but now *is*.

Blessing or Burden?

Bringing new life into the world is the most tremendous, astonishing thing a human being can do. Women are especially given the privilege of receiving and nurturing new life, being subcreators with God. In willingly receiving the embrace of the masculine, the power granted to the female sex is unleashed, and new, formerly nonexistent life blooms into the world.² Not only does the creation of new life propel civilization and culture into the next generation in

its myriad forms; it also changes those of us in the current generation in countless ways, demanding sacrifice on a scale you may never before have attempted.

But modern people are ambivalent about this immense privilege, to say the least.

The fear (if not the wonder) of children is something modern people see very clearly. We live in a society that has seen a sharp decline in the birth rate, to the point that there are not enough births to replace deaths—the so-called replacement rate. Fewer people today see children as a blessing.

Liberals tend to blame economic factors and conservatives tend to point to the rising tide of selfishness. One of the better books about this is *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood* by Jennifer Senior, because the author is careful not to overgeneralize. She lists

numerous reasons for the contemporary ambivalence toward parenting, but two stand out.

The first is the unprecedented emphasis in modern culture on personal autonomy and self-realization. We have more freedom to choose our careers, our sexual practices, our geographical location, whether to marry and stay married, whether to have children or not. “Few of us would want to reverse the historical advance that gave us our newfound freedoms,” she writes, but we have “come to define liberty negatively, as lack of dependence, the right not to be obligated to others . . . [and] to mean immunity from social claims on one’s wealth or time.”³

Because we strongly conceive of liberty as freedom from obligation, “parenthood is a dizzying shock.” We have now been given the right to choose or change anything that does not seem to be satisfying or benefiting us—job, location,

career, spouse. “But we can never choose or change our children. They are the last binding obligation in a culture that asks for almost no other permanent commitments at all.”⁴

I don’t think the “dizzying shock” to parents can simply be read as rank selfishness. Rather, parenting challenges all the habits of the heart that our culture has formed in us around relationships. Changing those habits is neither easy nor simple.

The other reason that modern parenthood is so paradoxical is that parents pour more emotional and financial capital into raising their children than ever, so much so that parenting “may have become . . . its own profession, so to speak.” There is only one problem with this job: “its goals are far from clear.” What are parents trying to actually *do* with their children? For example, “today’s parents are . . . charged with

the psychological well-being of their sons and daughters, which on the face of it is a laudable goal. But it’s a murky one.”⁵ Indeed—who defines “psychological well-being”? Does it simply mean happiness? Can’t cruel people be happy? Then is the goal to make them moral and good? Even though contemporary parents may want that, they live in a culture that insists moral values are culturally constructed. And usually people throw in that we should not impose our values on our children but let them choose their own. Really? Should we not care if they are not becoming honest, compassionate, fair dealing, and patient? Are those things we can let them choose—or not?

Christians have resources that speak directly to these challenges. To begin with, the biblical teaching about human nature reframes parental expectations. Modern child psychology

literature—and more popular, informal folk wisdom about parenting—always, inevitably, assumes some philosophical anthropology, some view of human nature that underlies everything else. It may be positive about our ability to shape our lives through our own choices or pessimistic about it. It may see human nature as basically good or as irremediably bad. The Bible, however, tells us that human beings are far greater *and* worse than we can imagine. We are made in God's image but deeply marred by our own sin. As C. S. Lewis's main character says to the human children in his *Chronicles of Narnia*:

“You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve,” said Aslan. “And that is both honor enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to

bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth. Be content.”⁶

This Christian view of human nature helps parents learn from—without fully accepting—a host of more reductionistic approaches to child development. There is more “conservative” literature that stresses things like discipline, limits, and the teaching of moral values, as well as more “progressive” materials that emphasize listening to children, strong affirmation, and giving them freedom to question and think for themselves. The Christian view of human beings as fallen bearers of the divine image can borrow from and learn from all of them without embracing their more simplistic views of the human heart.

Beyond this critical understanding of human

nature, Christianity gives us other resources that directly address the challenges that parents have always felt and feel today.

Giving Your Child

Children are a joy, but parents often sense a responsibility that can be overwhelming. The Christian church offers, in response, the sacrament of baptism.⁷ While not all Christians practice infant baptism, most have some way of publicly dedicating their children to God, which follows the Jewish practice. After Jesus's birth we are told: "Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord" (Luke 2:22).

When we bring our children to God in bap-

tism, it does not confer salvation automatically on the child. Just as God does not magically create new human beings but does it through the union of a man and a woman, so he normally brings about our second birth much like our first birth—through love relationships and, so often, through the family.

Sin tends to run in families. We see weaknesses in our parents and grandparents that show up in us even though we dislike the traits, even when we try with all our might to avoid them. But *grace* tends to run in families, too. Love and good models of faith and grace can lead a child to seek those things for himself or herself.

Baptizing your child is an enormous help to parents. It is a public service with vows, surrounded by friends in the Christian church com-