

Dear Son

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First Christian Church (DOC)  
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where Jonathan Hall serves as  
its Senior Pastor.

# **Dear Son:**

## **Raising Faithful, Just, and Compassionate Men**

**Jonathan B. Hall and Beau T. Underwood**

**Foreword by Jim Wallis**



Saint Louis, Missouri

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# Contents

<i>Foreword by Jim Wallis: “Starting a Conversation on Being a Dad”</i>	9
Introduction	13
1. The Joy of Fatherhood	17
2. The Pressures that Young Men Face	34
3. Helping to Break the Glass Ceiling	52
4. Seeing Color in a World of Black and White	69
5. The Purpose of Money	87
6. The Man God Hopes You Will Be	103
7. Promises to Keep	121
8. Following Jesus	137

## Foreword

# Starting a Conversation on Being a Dad

*by Jim Wallis*

That's what this book is: Conversations about what it means to be a Dad. I am happy to start the conversation with this forward. Conversations are about questions, so here are some of the questions about being a Dad that are important to me.

“So, what do you do?”

That is a question we all get asked these days. At social events, schools, sports games, community gatherings of all kinds and is even asked in our churches. Indeed, the question most often asked of parents is what they do “for a living.”

The question is mostly asked of men. It's true that women also get asked the question more and more these days. Most Moms I know work these days. According to the Labor Dept, near 3/4 of women with children under 18 worked in 2020. Non-working moms just aren't the norm anymore. But still in these community social gatherings, it is assumed that women with kids have a primary commitment to being a Mom; while that's not as clear for the men in the room. And while the men in the room are assumed to be the dads of some of the kids there, what else the men do is the question many people have. In other words, the

*careers* of the men in the room can seem more important than their *vocations* as fathers.

Yet, being a Dad is the reason why all the men showed up at the event, be it a ballgame or a parent-teacher's conference, or school related party. But personally, I have found it very refreshing and even freeing to answer the common question by being able just to say that I'm "Luke's Dad" or "Jack's Dad," instead of recounting all my work outside of these gatherings. For me, my work is not really career, but a vocation; but still, it's more enjoyable to point to one of my sons in the room and say, "I'm his Dad," and that is part of my vocation.

Most of the greatest joys in our life have to do with being Moms and Dads and yet the question most often asked is about what we do. Doesn't that seem backwards to you? This book is about answering the common question with the Dad identity first, instead of the work identity first, especially when your kids are the whole reason that you are all together in the social gathering where the question gets asked.

But perhaps the most important question about being a Dad is how you spend your time. It's not how you talk about fatherhood but how take the time to do it. What I've learned is that how you treat your time in relationship to your children—for me, my two sons—is the most important question of all. Is being a Dad what you do in your "spare time" time, around the edges? Or is it time that you set aside, put ahead of other things, and make a first priority? Especially for men who are public figures—and many of us are public in some arena—kids often get relegated to the time that is left over—which means you children become left-overs too.

Being a Dad can also be regarded as a discipline—let's even say a spiritual discipline—like prayer, meditation, reading Scripture, or being alone with God. From fatherhood, you can often learn many of the same lessons that we gather from the more traditional spiritual traditions. Spiritual disciplines will never succeed or be sustained if they are just for our "extra time" and the same

goes for parenthood. The cost is too great for our relationship to God or to those little human gifts that God has given to us. Setting aside *focused* time for both spiritual and family disciplines is the only way to being a genuine person of faith or being a good Dad.

For me and my family, baseball became a big part of our family discipline and the bonding. I was a Little League baseball coach for 22 seasons, over 11 years, for both of my boys. You simply can't do that in your left-over times. Both practices and games occur at the same times week in and week out and you have to build the rest of your schedule around *those times*—and not the other way around. Friday evenings and Saturdays were for us the regular baseball times. Of course, there were other times during the week that we spent together, but these baseball times were fixed, expected and reliable. So, for me, it meant no traveling and speaking on Fridays and Saturdays—period—during baseball season, which was both fall and spring.

What this offered to me and my boys was dependable time, bonding time, fun time, growing time, friendship and team building time, character formation time and lessons of life teaching times—which baseball is very good at! Not only did my time as a coach with my boys make us close, but it also got me close to their best friends and teammates, and even the parents of their teammates, which also served to bring me and my sons closer together.

Who is your most important *audience* is also a key question. I've had lots of audiences over these many years but, at some time along the way, I realized that my most important audience—meaning the people I get a chance to influence and shape—was my own children.

After every baseball game, I would always take our team away from the crowd for a post-game meeting—to share what we learned about the game, about baseball, about being a team, and even about ourselves as young men and women, and what



it means to become leaders. The parents, who had to wait until the meetings were over, were often chuckling and sometimes referred these meetings as my post-game “sermons,” though they were about getting the players to talk and not just me. In those precious conversations, we learned together about our talents and gifts, playing and looking out for each other and not just ourselves, serving and even sacrificing for the team, or what I call the “common good” in my work life, learning leadership skills and lessons, and believing in the power of hope. Being a part of countless teams with my sons, brought us closer together. And I have stayed in touch with many of the young men and women that I have coached—who became an audience of young adults.

This book is meant to spark conversations about fatherhood, about being a Dad. This is just a forward to that conversation, and I am very glad just to be a part of it. Listen now to Beau and Jonathan — two men who want to be good dads — to help you get this important conversation going in your own lives. I hope that one day you will feel what I feel about having kids: that being a Dad is the most important thing in my life.

## Introduction

We are not perfect dads. We do not claim to be. Nor is this book intended as a guide to being a dad. While we hope to raise our sons well, we are not putting ourselves forward as exemplars. We know there's more than one way to be a father and to raise a son. We know that family circumstances are unique, and that life unfolds differently for every parent and child.

Our intention is simpler yet more profound: We want each father to reflect on what it means to have a son that calls them the weighty name of "Dad." Rather than teaching what fatherhood should be, we want to challenge each dad to make fatherhood their own. Do not uncritically accept what others tell you. Do not simply follow convention. Do not let the days and years go by without making them your own, without being the type of dad you want to be.

Our hope for this book is not only to spark a conversation about what it means to be a dad. Rather, it is to share a model of writing letters to our son(s). Letter writing is an almost lost art that we think is worth revisiting, as many find fatherhood to be daunting, lonely, and without a clear path. This way of communicating allows the writer to record their thoughts at a single moment in time to revisit in the future. It is a way to talk across the years by capturing wisdom and expressing love. It is one way of facilitating the father-son bond whose strength can last for a lifetime.

Each chapter that follows covers a different topic with a separate reflection from each of us. In reading our thoughts, you will see that our own approaches often contrast because of our different backgrounds, social locations, and personality quirks. Though our approaches might differ, our letters are all honest, authentic reflections about being dads. We believe that raising our boys to be faithful, just, and compassionate men has the capability to change the world and better reflect God's Purpose for it. We imagine you believe that too.

We want to encourage you to do the same. This book is not just meant to be read, but to be engaged with. At the close of each chapter you will find pages ready for your words and reflections. Having read our thoughts and stories on a topic, we invite you to write your own. By modeling our way of contemplating this special role, we want this book to help you become a better, more reflective dad.

We find the tradition of adding your story to an unfolding and enfolding story to be our experience with scripture. Take the example of the first canonical gospel, Mark. It has multiple endings. In fact, if you have a Study Bible, you will see comments on this. Many scholars believe that the original ending of Mark was 16:8—the women being afraid, fleeing the tomb, and not telling a single person about what had happened. Later, other people added their experience of the resurrected Christ to the end of Mark's Gospel.

We've written our book in the same manner. Rather than it being "The Final Word on Raising Faithful Boys," we are just beginning a conversation. We hope that you will add your unique story to ours. In the end, may we all experience the hope of the resurrection in the process!

If you are someone who thrives on structure, then consider using this book in a disciplined way. Commit to reading one chapter a week and then setting aside some time to write your own letter to your son. After eight weeks, you will probably think

of new topics and continue the practice of writing long after the reading is done.

\* \* \*

Since we are asking you to invest time reading our thoughts on fatherhood, you deserve to know a little bit about us and why we wrote this book.

Both of us are ministers within a denomination called the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Our career paths have taken us to a variety of places. We have pastored churches in places as different as California, Colorado, Missouri, and Washington, D.C. One of us (Jonathan) learned about global Christianity by studying at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland. The other (Beau) has worked for progressive faith-based advocacy organizations in this nation's capital.

Regardless of the stops along our vocational journeys, one constant has been our friendship. We first met in college while serving in a leadership role with a denominationally-sponsored student ministry. Recognizing common interests and personalities, we became fast friends.

We have never lived in the same place. Our college selves could not have imagined all the twists and turns our lives would take, but we are grateful for each other's presence, camaraderie, and support along the way.

A new chapter began in each of our lives the moment our son(s) were born. Just as we moved along parallel tracks through college, seminary, and our careers in ministry, having kids at similar points became another shared experience that sparked conversation. This book was born out of our common wonder and joy at raising boys.

We pray our words will prove encouraging and inspiring to you. Your choosing to read them is heartening to us.

*—Jonathan & Beau*

# 1

## The Joy of Fatherhood

Dear Son,

“A miracle,” wrote the playwright George Bernard Shaw, “is an event that creates faith.”<sup>1</sup> Jesse, your arrival in this world sparked joy and stirred hope in my life. It expanded my sense of what is possible and deepened my trust in the God who makes this all possible. You, my son, are a miracle.

Using miraculous language to describe the birth of a child borders on the trite. Plus, this depiction is wrong. Miracles are events that violate the laws of nature. Generating offspring is the quintessential biological task. Organisms exist to reproduce. Teachers describe to awkward, giggling teenagers during health class the lack of supernatural intervention required. By definition, there is nothing miraculous going on here.

Still, I refuse to believe it. Science may explain your physical existence but something more was involved. The explanations of textbooks cannot capture all the meaning that bursts forth when we enter the world. These events are far more expansive than what biology has to tell us. The birth of a child is an inflection point. What happens in that single moment forever changes everything that follows.

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987).

Your mom and I know this truth firsthand. Alongside so many figures in the Hebrew Bible, we were forced to imagine a future without you. Our dreams of starting a family prompted a move across the country. We bought the big house, with the large fenced-in yard, in confidence that a baby would soon follow. But, like Abraham and Sarah, like Isaac and Rebekah, like Jacob and Rachel, we found ourselves lamenting the absence of a child.

We spent several years trying to get pregnant, with no success. At first we assumed patience was the only thing required, but the elapsing of months brought a strange kind of desperation. While not old, we also were not young. The ticking of the proverbial clock—an expression I now hate for its torturous images of our lives passing by and opportunities being lost — prompted us to seek help.

The biblical matriarchs and patriarchs could not have imagined the options available to us today. While I hated the idea of our bodies becoming sites of scientific experimentation, I welcomed the introduction of medical expertise. Something wasn't working with our bodies and we realized that by ourselves we weren't going to identify either the problem or a solution. Perhaps our miracle would arrive in the form of a physician.

Unfortunately, the fertility doctor was a difficult pill to swallow. He was my first encounter with someone manifesting a “God complex.” We walked into the office and found his ego displayed on the wall in the form of a mosaic of baby pictures from successful pregnancies. His message was clear: “I can make this happen for you, too.” He may have meant it as reassurance, but it only increased my sense of insecurity and inadequacy. Everyone on that wall had succeeded where we, so far, had failed. At that time, he was the only fertility specialist in our area. We endured his arrogance as we moved through a battery of tests and drug regimes. Unfortunately, nothing seemed to change except the depths of our despair.

Our focus shifted to starting a family in a different way. We entered the adoption process. Offering a future to a child whose

horizons might otherwise be limited counteracted the disappointment nesting within us. The social worker told us that a match would happen within a year. The nine months of anticipation during a pregnancy transformed into a twelve month gauntlet of meetings, home visits, reference checks, and other steps, but the result promised to be the same. Emotionally we wrestled with accepting this altered vision of how our family would take shape, but nonetheless excitement arose within us about this prospect.

Then, the unexpected occurred. Holiday travel made continuing the fertility treatments practically impossible, so we gave them up until January and set off for an extended California vacation. I enjoyed the ocean views and the amenities of our resort. Your mom spent the trip with a stomach that was constantly unsettled. We dared to wonder and wish what it might portend but, given the diagnosed infertility and the pausing of treatment, mostly dismissed the possibility.

We returned home to freezing temperatures and a hefty bill in the mail from the adoption agency, which had to be paid for the process to move forward. Before writing the check, your mom took a pregnancy test; and then another; and then another. To our shock and surprise, you were on the way. I was going to be a dad! Suddenly we knew the experience of the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs in a different way. Our dashed hopes for the future promised by a child were suddenly renewed.

As we began spreading our news, other dads relayed their own experience of fatherhood to me. Sometimes in a hushed whisper, as if they were disclosing a family secret, and at other times with great exclamation, as if they wanted the entire world to hear, they would say things like: “Your life is going to change in the most amazing way!” and “The world will never look the same again!”

I nodded in agreement, and would say things like “oh, I know” or “for sure.” But inside I had my doubts. Those doubts had nothing to do with my excitement about becoming a dad. I was

as enthusiastic as one could be, but I tend to be a realist. Even the most wonderful things have their drawbacks. These dads were acting like raising a son never involved smelly diapers/nappies, temper tantrums, growing pains, challenging conversations, and all the fears that come with bringing a child into an uncertain and dangerous world. They made their declarations with a confidence that bordered on hyperbole. In our experience, such emphatic claims rarely held true.

These confident exclamations reminded me of late night infomercials I watched as a kid. My parents—your grandparents—bought a 12-inch Zenith TV for my bedroom one Christmas. It cost a small fortune relative to the price of televisions today, but it meant my insomnia would no longer disrupt their sleep. Instead, I would lie awake at night flipping through channels until something captured my attention. This was long before the advent of Internet streaming and TV-on-demand, and we only had basic cable, which meant my viewing options at such a late hour were quite limited.

I would frequently end up watching an infomercial for the latest, greatest product. If I would just rush to the phone (this was also long before the days of online shopping) and set up three easy payments on a credit card (promised the person making the pitch) my life would change forever. Here was a form of salvation. There was a problem from which we needed to be rescued. Deliverance was available but we needed to “Call right now!”

This logic never made sense to me. If the product was so ingenious, then why were they paying for air time at 2 a.m. on channel 4? Why wouldn't stores choose to stock it, and why wasn't it flying off their shelves? If the offer was so good, then why did they need to sweeten the deal (“But wait...there's more!”) to convince people to buy? The reality rarely matched the hype.

I wondered whether fatherhood would prove to be the same. I feared that the heightened expectations others had created



would lead to inevitable disappointment as the day-to-day stress of parenting overshadowed the ecstasy everyone guaranteed was coming my way.

Thankfully, my skepticism was unfounded. Becoming and then being a dad has exceeded those assurances from the other dads—and then some.

Indeed, the moment you were born is one I will never forget. After your mom and the medical team did all the hard work of bringing you into the world, seconds later I got to lay my eyes on you. Despite my usual stoicism, those eyes suddenly filled with moisture. I tried to hide my tears of happiness because there was still so much action happening in that hospital room.

The doctor and the nurses were yelling out directions, as a whirlwind of activity overtook a space that had instantly transformed into a nursery. Your mom was still going through the birthing process, with all the intensity and pain involved. I just stood there, next to the bed, overwhelmed by emotion. I was crying uncontrollably. Something miraculous had happened.

My joy at first seeing you is hard to express in words. In an instant, my entire world changed. My reasons for living had expanded and deepened. You were here, dependent upon your mother and me. We entered the hospital as a family of two and left as a family of three. I recall strolling by the nurses' station as we departed and waiting for them to stop us from leaving. Part of me could not believe we got to take you home. The other part of me could not believe they trusted us to keep you alive! But we quickly got over the imposter syndrome and on with the business of parenting. We left with a profound sense of purpose caused by your newfound presence among us.

As a pastor, one of my annual roles is preaching a sermon on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. I stand up before a bunch of Christians to address what the shepherds call “this thing that has happened” (Luke 6:15 NIV). Some preachers live for this moment, but frankly I find it daunting. My task is to say some-

thing captivating and meaningful about a story the congregation knows almost by heart. They may conflate the different versions in Matthew and Luke, but they're familiar with how the events unfolded.

Except that they do not really understand it at all. None of us do. The story seems familiar on the surface, but when you dive a little deeper, the whole thing becomes unfathomable. The main claim is that God became like us in Jesus Christ. We call this the "Incarnation." Christians believe that, in the Incarnation, God came to be with us, but that idea is so exotic that our words are not as coherent as they sound. The most appropriate response we can offer to this astounding thing God has done is awe. On many occasions, I have been tempted to stand silently in the pulpit and just stare at the nativity scene with my mouth agape. My gawking would nicely convey the message. "Here is God!" announce the angels. Other than stunned surprise, is there any response that is appropriate?

Rather than preaching that stirring message in such a silent fashion, my words—and I presume that of many other pastors—usually dwell not on the metaphysics of God's arrival but on the implications that arrival or advent has for our lives. God is here! Now, what do we do? The obvious answer is take notice, change your ways accordingly, and experience the abundant life being offered.

To be clear, I would never liken you to the Christ child. You may be my perfect son but none of us is a perfect human. Plus, I want to keep your ego in check for all the discussions we are destined to have down the proverbial road. Still, there's an analogy between the birth of Jesus and welcoming a baby of your own. Your priorities have to change dramatically. Being a parent calls you to a new way of denying yourself and living for someone else.

To be your dad has required significant sacrifices. There are books left unread, ball games that went unwatched, and a lot of money spent on things I never would have bought for myself.

Those costs are real but I have no regret about them. Love and joy motivated every expense and sacrifice.

The comparison to the Christian life runs even deeper. For too many people, the biggest obstacle to following Jesus is what they perceive having to give up. As G.K. Chesterton, the philosopher and theologian, once wrote: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” Those intrigued by Christian faith realize their lives will have to change. The costs appear quite high, so some people decide to forego the adventure. This emphasis on the burdens of being a disciple fails to account for any of the benefits. The sacrifice may be significant but the sheer blessing that comes with the experience is incalculable.

Julian of Norwich, the mystical writer from the Middle Ages, claimed that “the fullness of joy is to behold God in everything.”<sup>2</sup> Her exhortation reverses, yet compliments, scripture’s promise that we are filled with joy when we enter the presence of God (Psalm 16:11). There is a Christmas sermon here that I have not yet preached about finding joy in the manger and then seeing Christ everywhere else.

What I have realized is how joy overcame me in receiving you as a gift. To hold you was to feel as if I was in the presence of God. Your entrance into our lives was not an accomplishment on our end but a creative act of the Divine, whereby something wonderful was shared with us not because we deserved it but because there is a love underlying the world that surpasses our understanding.

Being your dad has surpassed any expectations I could have held because those hopes were vested in an idea, in an anticipation of what might be. Now that you are here in the flesh, an actual person with your beautiful smile and quirky personality, those abstract notions have become concrete. As C.S. Lewis put

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<sup>2</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Barry Windeatt (London: Oxford University Press, 2015).

it, “Joy itself, considered simply as an event in my own mind, turned out to be of no value at all. All the value lay in that of which Joy was the desiring.”<sup>5</sup>

You have not only brought me joy. You *are* my joy. What an irony that I have written you this lengthy letter to say that in becoming your dad I have experienced a joy that cannot be put into words!

That reality has bolstered my faith. It is the reason I dare to call you a miracle. I look at you, behold God, and discover the fullness of joy anew.

With steadfast love,  
Dad

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955).