

Life Together

PRACTICAL TIPS
ON LIVING AS A FAMILY



LIFE...
TOGETHER

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The International Lutheran Laymen's League

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INTRODUCTION

What's a family? That may be an easier question if you are a child than if you are an adult. Ask a child what a family is and the answer will probably be "the people I live with." Ask an adult, and images of childhood and adulthood may all mix up bringing to mind several different kinds of family.

That's because families come in all sizes and all shapes. There are big families, little families, families with mothers and fathers and children, families that include grandparents and other relatives, families that are one parent and a child, and even families that include not only relatives but other people who aren't related.

We also could think of "good" families and "not so good" families — families which support each family member, and families which seem to destroy each other.

Since "what is a family?" isn't an easy question, let's change it for a moment. Let's think about an orchestra and ask, "What's an orchestra?" A simple answer may be a group of people who play musical instruments and come together to make music. We could think about large orchestras, small orchestras, and even good orchestras and not so good orchestras.

The wild combination of sounds of each musician warming up before a concert could make the person who has never heard an orchestra think it's not a good way to make music. Each musician seems to be doing something different at a different pace.

But when the conductor finally steps in front of the group of musicians and raises the baton, the sound suddenly blends together to produce one unified mood. And the individual instruments, still individual, fit together to produce something which would not be possible individually.

Not every group of musicians is as skilled as a symphony orchestra, but musicians get joy from coming together and making music together. They don't gather to spend their time warming up making their own separate sounds. They gather to participate in the music. They don't come together to each play a different tune.

A family, like a musical group, gathers to make music together; each member playing a part like a well-tuned instrument. And when one instrument is out of tune, it is reflected in the sound of the whole group.

At least that is what families are intended to do. The one who brings families together is the God who created all people and gave family to every culture

and every age — even among those who don't believe in Him as their God.

The God who sent His Son Jesus Christ to the world is the God who is the conductor — the One who can turn the individual sounds into beautiful music. A lot of people don't believe that they can make music together in family. A lot of people feel as if they are intended to live their lives alone, unneeded, unwanted, abandoned by others.

One of the basic needs of all people is to be a part of a group just as surely as the musician gets to play better in a group with other musicians. Not all people are surrounded by mother, father, brothers, sisters; but all people can be touched by those around them and can become part of another kind of family. The closest of these families is the church which gathers in the name of Jesus Christ. The church is one of the places where people of all ages, backgrounds, and incomes can gather and be called by a common name — Christian.

The Bible doesn't contain a lot of examples of families which are just father, mother, and children. But there are a lot of examples of people, related and unrelated, caring for each other.

Abraham and Sarah weren't a typical couple, having children in their early years and looking forward to enjoying their grandchildren in their middle and

later years. Quite the opposite, they were well past the child-bearing age when Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5,7).

In the New Testament, the parents of John the Baptizer — Elizabeth and Zechariah — were also older people when their son was born (Luke 1:18). And the mother of the Lord Jesus was a young woman who visited her relative Elizabeth to share the news about her pregnancy (Luke 1:39-45). Tradition holds that Joseph the husband of Mary was much older than his wife.

In the book of Ruth, we see Ruth, a widow, and her mother-in-law, Naomi (also a widow), who form a new family unit after their husbands die. These two women are as loving and supporting of one another as any family group can be as they construct a new life out of the ashes of the old life.

And one of the gems in the book of Esther is the supportive relationship between Queen Esther and her uncle Mordacai in the face of all sorts of difficulties which threaten to destroy the people of God.

From these examples, it is evident that family can be more than just those with whom individuals live. The family into which you were born and in which you grew up may be separated now by time and space. The people whom you call family today may be different from the

above examples. As you read through these pages, if the families shared here don't exactly fit the kind of family you have, think of how the ideas can be useful to you anyway as a member of God's large family, the human race, and as a person who lives someplace. Apply the ideas to the people around you and make those people your family!

Live the words of the psalmist:

"All you that are righteous, shout for joy for what the Lord has done; praise Him, all you that obey Him. Give thanks to the Lord with harps, sing to Him with stringed instruments. Sing a new song to Him, play the harp with skill, and shout for joy!"
(Psalm 33:1-3).

To Think About

My family is (still together, scattered, etc.)

I think of my family as (relatives, people who are close to me, people in my neighborhood, my church)_____

I can start thinking of neighbors, church people, etc. _____ as part of my family because they provide a lot of support for me.

CHAPTER 1

Thanks...

Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Goethe, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Bach — what do they have in common? All were great artists, and all were probably more famous after death than while alive! Think of how much better you feel when you realize another person has benefitted by something you have done.

We can't reach back and say, "Thanks, Rembrandt," but perhaps there are people closer to us who have touched us more deeply than any of the great artists. Maybe none of the above names mean anything to you, so take a moment and think of an "artist" in your life — relative, close friend, teacher, or co-worker — who has made a difference in some way. It takes a lot of "artists" to bring a human being from birth to adulthood. Humans experience long periods of time where they are not capable of caring for themselves.

Often we focus on how cute babies are, but they are really very selfish, centered on themselves, wanting their needs met before anybody else's needs. The reward that parents get is an occasional smile because the parents are doing what they are supposed to do.

Read the story of the largest family trip in the world when the Children of Israel left Egypt for the Promised land under the leadership of Moses. Quite a family! Moses is a loving, protecting parent and the Israelites are surly, taking children. Slavery in Egypt seems to be forgotten quickly as they complain about every little thing. Wanting more food, they said, *“We wish the Lord had killed us in Egypt. There we could at least sit down and eat meat and as much other food as we wanted. But you have brought us out into this desert to starve us all to death”* (Exodus 16:3). Instead of punishing them as they deserved, God provided solid food for them. And when they were thirsty, they whined in the same way: *“Why did you bring us out of Egypt—to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”* (Exodus 17:3).

Sound familiar? Many people hear the negative so much more often than the positive. If the Israelites lives had depended on how well they expressed appreciation rather than on the faithfulness of God and His servant Moses, they would have perished at the beginning of the trip. If our lives depended on our ability to express appreciation, many of us would not survive, either.

Still, a characteristic of strong families is that they support each member of the family; and as they express their appreciation for each other, they grow

together. They grow up with the children and grow old with the adults, delighting in each one of the stages.

When brothers and sisters get together as adults, they often play a game which could be called, "Remember When" :
"Remember when we were at grandmother's/grandfather's, and they gave us that little toy that we pretended was a giant space ship, and we all went to the moon in it? Remember when we took that trip across town — and, suddenly, one of us didn't feel well, and Dad had to stop the car, and Mother was so concerned?" Often, other members of the family never realize that those moments were so precious until we share them again. Shades of Rembrandt! Think of saying right at the time it is happening, "Thanks!" "Thanks for the moment!" "Thanks for being you!"

Looking back on these special times reminds people of how closely they are bonded together. Bonding means that one thing is pressed together with another thing so that the two are glued together with a permanency which cannot pull them apart. People become bonded together by living as family, by experiencing the same joys and the same sorrows, by being able to identify one with another.

People who have never met before suddenly act like long lost friends when

meeting in another community, they discover they are from the same home town. They have a common bond even if it is only the name of a village or nation.

Think of the bond being more than a name: a bond established through support, love, and mutually expressing appreciation while each is still alive. How much better than thinking the words of affirmation when there is no longer an opportunity to express them!

So many of our cultures give a final time to care for a loved one at that person's funeral. All of the kind words and sentiments can be expressed to other people or suppressed in grief over moments lost, never to be recaptured. Don't wait until it's too late! Say those words now! They will stay with you and the other people all their lives.

Ruth affirmed her bond to Naomi by telling her that she would be with her no matter what happened. "*Wherever you go, I will go*" (Ruth 1:16). She let Naomi know that she was the most important person in her life at that time of need for both of them and that, no matter what happened to them, they were together. This togetherness is reflected throughout the whole book. Even when Ruth marries Boaz and a new family unit is formed, Naomi remains bonded to Ruth. Imagine the feelings of Naomi in the following

sequence: *“So Boaz took Ruth home as his wife. The Lord blessed her, and she became pregnant and had a son. The women said to Naomi, ‘Praise the Lord! He has given you a grandson today to take care of you. May the boy become famous in Israel! Your daughter-in-law loves you, and has done more for you than seven sons. And now she has given you a grandson, who will bring new life to you and give you security in your old age.’ Naomi took the child, held him close, and took care of him” (Ruth 4:13-16).*

Naomi was given new life by God through her being bonded to Ruth. Her family seemed destroyed when she lost her sons and her husband. But the persistent support of Ruth helped her to be reborn. Naomi’s friends recognized God as the Source of life, new life, and called on her to praise Him.

“Praise God with shouts of joy, all people! Sing to the glory of His name; offer Him glorious praise!” (Psalm 66:1-2)

TO THINK ABOUT

Who in your life has made you feel a part of a family? _____

Who makes you feel a part today? _____

If you have trouble showing appreciation to others (and to God), what can you do to be freer in showing it? _____

Think of how you can strengthen your bonds to other individuals, your family.

CHAPTER 2

Being Together. . .

“What’s happened to our family?” is a common question asked by many people the world over as they recall the time when they all ate together, worked together, played together, and were proud of their family name which set them apart from other families in their area as it signified their own unity.

For many, the family farm was the place of fond memories of parents, brothers, sisters, and other relatives. Moving from the farm to the factory meant more money for many families, but it also brought along other effects associated with the loss of closeness as each person began going in a different direction.

Picture the family dinner table where every member is wearing a stereo radio headset, listening to a different radio station, and eating a different meal. A ridiculous picture? Sad, perhaps, but not so far-fetched that it doesn’t symbolically represent many families around the world who find it impossible to sit down and eat together.

Throughout the world, long distance air flights provide individual meal service and occasionally stereo headsets offering a variety of program choices. It is possible to fly from one city to another, breathing, eating, and sleeping,

interrupted only by announcements by the flight crew which are absolutely necessary for safety such as fastening seat belts and putting your own seat back into an upright position. One hundred or more people — all going to the same place and all able to ignore the others — can be a lonely scene, typifying modern life where people can be crowded together and, yet, remain strangers.

Two, four, six, eight people living in a household ignoring each other can be just as lonely as an empty farmhouse that once was filled with the sounds of a farm family eating, working, praying, and playing together. That farm house — now standing empty, deserted, and falling apart because it lacks the care of loving people — is the symbol for many of what is happening to the family around the world.

Still today, however, strong families withstand pressures that pull them apart and are able to make time for each other. There are places in the world where families work together on family farms or in family-owned businesses, but the majority find themselves separated during the working day. This makes the family meal even more important.

Looking at the dinner table can tell observers a lot about the family system. Does one person do all of the talking? Is talking not allowed? Is the dinner table used as the place to give orders and to

reprimand wayward members? Is it dominated by rapt attention to a television set? Is it a place bubbling with conversation and good feelings?

A mark of hospitality is to give a visitor food or drink signifying friendship, equality, and acceptance into the fellowship. A good meal becomes even better when enjoyed in the company of others.

The family table is especially festive when the family remembers special occasions and special people, whether gathering around the most meager of foods or a veritable feast of favorites.

But families don't need special occasions to celebrate their togetherness. Even with the loss of a common work experience, mealtime — from preparation to eating to cleaning up after — can be turned into a time in which family works, plays and enjoys each member from baby who throws food on the floor right up to grandfather who expresses mild disapproval for such behavior.

People who feel excluded from the family table will find that they also exclude themselves from other family activities. Think of the impossibility of planning family worktime or playtime when even mealtime cannot be coordinated!

Recognizing the importance of family meals has helped many a family move from simply surviving to recognizing

the richness of their mutual experiences. Many of us never knew we were poor because we had so much to share over a simple bowl of soup made from the most meager ingredients. Far poorer was the person dining in an expensive restaurant without the benefit of such good company.

When Jesus gathered His disciples for what has become known as the Last Supper, it wasn't around a sumptuous banquet table in a festive hall. They came together to observe the Passover in a borrowed room. As they gathered over that customary meal, Jesus not only looked back into history, but He also established a pattern for all Christians to follow until the end of time.

Looking forward and even beyond His own suffering on the cross for all humanity, He stood custom of the world on the end and showed what it means to be in community with others and to be a leader like no other leader the world had known. The Gospel of John shares the exciting story of Jesus washing the feet of each disciple present over the objections of the disciples (John 13:12). They were people concerned about power, prestige, and pride. Undoubtedly, they were proud to follow the King and were concerned about an order of importance which divides leader from follower, father from mother, parent from child. In washing His disciples' feet, Jesus gave a

powerful witness to what life together can be when people are concerned about sharing themselves rather than maintaining an artificial importance.

Think, too, of the specialness of the moment and what has been passed through the ages to all believers as He transformed the Passover commemoration into the Lord's Supper as He said, "Take eat," and "Take drink."

The Gospel of John ends with Jesus inviting disciples who had been out fishing to eat a simple meal of bread and fish with Him (John 21:12-13). The food was common to them and, yet, festive — because the Savior, who had been forsaken for them and by them, showed them His love and forgiveness as He spoke especially to Peter and commissioned him for a life of service.

Many Christians use a simple table prayer which is full of meaning as it invites Jesus to be present, to bless the food they share, and also to return physically among them. *"Come, Lord Jesus. Be our guest; and let this food to us be blessed."*

"He who gives His testimony to all this says, 'Yes, indeed! I am coming soon!'"

"So be it. Come, Lord Jesus! May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with everyone"
(Revelation 22:20-21).

TO THINK ABOUT

What do you do to create family around you, even if you live alone? _____

What do you do (can you do) to make at least one meal a day a special time?

Think of your patterns of work and play. Are you satisfied with what you do alone and with other people? If not, what can you do to get a better balance?

CHAPTER 3

Talking Together

In many communities when the weather is pleasant enough, elderly gentlemen sit on benches in the town square, watching others hurry by, commenting to friends about the affairs of the world, and generally feeling part of the community in which they invested so much of their lives.

In other places, elderly men and women sit alone with a pet, a radio, and a television set, worrying about the health of the pet; what will happen to it if something happens to them; feeling like friends to certain radio or television people.

Meanwhile, in some houses, children and adults live lives ignoring other individuals around them, dreaming of the time when they can be on their own, accountable to no one else; saying they can't wait until they are free enough to do exactly as they please, free to just sit by themselves, free of all people, free of the need to share anything with anybody.

A fifty-year-old woman wrote a friend bemoaning the fact that she had lived her life never really sharing her feelings with anybody. Nobody really knows who she is — not even she knows. In not sharing with other people, she also missed out on the opportunity to know herself better through the give and take

of testing her thoughts and feelings with other people who cared enough about her to support her in good and bad times. She now realizes it.

God does not create human beings to be alone. He creates them as thinking, feeling people, with the ability to say what they think and share what they feel. Even pets find ways to communicate their needs to their owners. And when a baby cries, the parents figure out what is wrong. As people grow, their ability to share what they are feeling and thinking also should grow. But many people find their sharing skills never grow because they never practice them. Males in many cultures are taught that it is not masculine to share what they think and what they feel.

Strong families are havens for people to share what they think and what they feel. Their homes are places where they can say silly things and not be laughed at for them — places where they can confide that worms make them uncomfortable even though they love to go fishing. Families are laboratories for life in which the individuals can find out what it means to be male or female and who they are as persons.

“In sickness and in health” applies to couples, to families, and to friends alike. Different needs at different times mean that different people will be giving and

receiving depending upon the needs of each person. It doesn't mean keeping score to make sure that each person gets and gives exactly the same as each other person.

The parable of the Prodigal Son, also known today as the parable of The Forgiving Father, says as much about family communication as any section of Scripture. It shows: a child turning his back on family only to realize that there is no other place for him to live — and being willing to serve in his father's household as a servant; the forgiving father who takes his son back in spite of what he has done; the elder son who has served faithfully and is overcome with envy and jealousy because his father never gave a party to celebrate his faithfulness (Luke 15:11-32).

The point of the parable is that God accepts us back even though we don't deserve to be accepted. At the same time, it comments about family life and the problems which develop. Of course, the father had every right to do what he pleased with the property, but many of us will identify with the faithful son, believing that we deserve much more attention and praise for what we do than we actually receive.

The prodigal son, recognizing his very basic need to move beyond simply struggling for survival and throwing himself at his father's feet, must have

been overwhelmed by his father's reaction. His father not only recognized his basic needs, he shared with his son how much he loved him and how much they needed each other.

Think how much richer the life of the elder son would have been if he had realized day-by-day the deep-rooted relationship that he had with his father and could also have had with his brother! Isn't it a shame that so many of us fail to realize how close we really are to family and friends until something out of the ordinary happens!

The relationship of Jacob and Laban in the Old Testament is one of those which is far less than ideal. Laban took advantage of Jacob every chance that he could. Jacob was protected by God or he would have fallen to little more than slave status. It was God who kept Jacob and Laban in any kind of healthy relationship (Genesis: 29, 30 & 31).

Jacob and Laban, on parting from each other, made an agreement which is quoted often. When it was time to go their separate ways, they piled up stones to build a memorial, ate a meal together (as a sign of their unity), and swore an oath of good will as Laban said, *"May the Lord keep an eye on us while we are separated from each other"* (Genesis 31:49).

Laban expressed his feelings to Jacob in as open a way as many males today express feelings toward one another. Reading the whole chapter, what he said to Jacob was that Jacob would be in serious trouble if he did anything to hurt Laban's daughters or grandchildren. Laban is letting Jacob know that he still considers his daughters as daughters first and wives to Jacob second.

Considering the context of that glorious oath between Jacob and Laban makes us realize that Laban never could experience the fullness of what life could have been. Laban had been concerned about possessions, worldly goods, instead of getting the most he could out of the relationships with the people around him and giving as much as he could of himself to them. If it wouldn't have been for the hand of God in his life, Laban's life would have been much more miserable than it was in his scheming to get more for himself.

It is easy to point out the faults that Laban had, but how many of us can see our own shortcomings in our dealings with others? And how many of us see the hand of God in our lives and in our contacts with those around us, and take advantage of the opportunities to share who we really are and what we can do for one another?

“You are the people of God; He loved you and chose you for His own. So, then, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you. And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity” (Colossians 3:12-14).

TO THINK ABOUT

Who are the people that meet your needs to share what you think or feel? (friend, relatives, people at school or work) _____

Do people share their thoughts and feelings with you frequently? _____

What can you do to be more open to others so that they can share with you?

The closing Scripture passage emphasizes the importance of forgiveness in relationships. What do you do (can you do) to make it a central part of your dealings with yourself and others? _____

CHAPTER 4

Growing Together

“When I’m able, I’m going to leave this town and never come back. It must be the most boring place in the world. There’s never anything to do. Everybody seems satisfied to do things in the same old way. Nobody understands me or realizes that I’m different from them.”

Sound familiar? It could be the prodigal son speaking before he took his portion of the inheritance and headed for the big city. It could be a young person speaking of his or her home town or family. It could be an adult wanting to shake off tradition, responsibility, routine.

Tradition is an important part of life. It helps give meaning and stability to individuals, families, organizations, and communities. Tradition reminds us of who we are, where we have been, and helps determine where we are going. The father in the musical “Fiddler on the Roof” recognizes the importance of tradition as he sings about it in his conversations with God. But what happened to him was the breakdown of tradition — and the destruction of the family unit as he knew it — in favor of different lifestyles which even carried some of his family members to different communities.

Picture today a small community discouraging its young people from going to college; instead, training them for jobs in stores, factories, and farms in the local area. It's not an impossible picture, because in small communities the elders know that as the young experience education on the outside, they stay in the cities seeking other opportunities.

At one time, no one would think about leaving home, because the whole world revolved around the traditions passed from one generation to the next. Each child born into the community and each adult living there was important. The individuals knew they were important because the community reminded them of it in many little ways.

The Passover meal reminds Jewish people of who they are. It involves the whole family in the retelling of how God rescued the Children of Israel from Egypt. From the youngest to the oldest, all are involved in the meal, and all hear the story told year after year.

Telling the family story is as important today in societies which change constantly as it was in societies which remained relatively unchanging. Individuals leave the family nest, but they take their family with them wherever they go. "You're so much like your mother (or father)" may be said as

an insult or a compliment. Whatever the intention, there is truth in the statement. As individuals grow physically and intellectually, they also reflect the influence of their families and others close to them.

Strong families are families which recognize the importance of tradition — the past — and, yet, allow for the individuals to develop as separate persons. So they celebrate their togetherness as family and their separateness as individuals living in a society. Holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays are all important to strong families.

The prophet Samuel and his mother Hannah are an example of a family which recognized both the bond of the family and growth of the individual. When Samuel was born, Hannah dedicated him to the Lord's service, and at a young age Samuel did leave his home to serve in the house of the Lord. Even though Hannah had five other children, Samuel remained an important part of the family unit. *"Each year his mother [Hannah] would make a little robe and take it to him [Samuel] when she accompanied her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice"* (1 Samuel 2:19).

Samuel and Hannah stand out because of their faithfulness in their commitment to God and to each other and also because they demonstrate that family

commitment may stay strong even when family members are physically separated from one another.

Rapid communication and transportation make it possible for family members to remain close even though no longer living in the same households. But it's the commitment that the members have to each other and to the family that keeps them close whether they live in the same house, same community, or same region. Much of that commitment is built through the family rituals which develop in the routine of eating together daily, celebrating special days annually, and even in grieving over personal and family losses.

The early life of Jesus is full of references to His family observing the rituals of their religion which helped families and the nation know who they were as they looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. The beautiful second chapter of the Gospel of Luke contains not only the birth story but also the story of the circumcision and naming of Jesus as well as of the twelve year old Jesus amazing everybody in the temple. Twice, Jesus' physical and mental growth are mentioned: First, after His presentation as a baby in Jerusalem *"When Joseph and Mary had finished doing all that was required by the law of the Lord, they returned to their home town of Nazareth in Galilee. The Child grew and*

became strong; He was full of wisdom, and God's blessings were upon Him" (Luke 2:39-40); second, at the age of twelve "So Jesus went back with them to Nazareth, where He was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. Jesus grew both in body and in wisdom, gaining favor with God and men" (Luke 2:51-52).

Jesus expanded our understanding of family as He included all sorts of people in His own circle of close friends and as He stressed the importance of reaching out to other people. He also emphasized the importance of family ties even while on the cross, making sacrifice for the sins of all humanity. The Gospel of John reports:

"Standing close to Jesus' cross were His mother, His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. Jesus saw His mother and the disciple He loved standing there; so He said to His mother, 'He is your son.' Then He said to the disciple, 'She is your mother.' From that time the disciple took her to live in his home" (John 19:25-27).

Jesus' bond of togetherness with His mother extended from birth to death and into eternity. Not all people are fortunate enough to come from a loving, caring family, but all of us can recognize our need for commitment to other people and start building new memories from today on — and seek to live with those around us in the peace and

harmony that Jesus bought on the cross.

“How wonderful it is, how pleasant for God’s people to live together in harmony! It is like the precious anointing oil running down Aaron’s head and beard, down to the collar of his robes. It is like the dew on Mount Hermon falling on the hills of Zion. That is where the Lord has promised His blessing — life that never ends” (Psalm 133).

TO THINK ABOUT

What traditions were important in the family in which you grew up? _____

Which of these traditions are still important to you today? _____

What do these traditions contribute to your life? _____

No matter how old a person is, he or she can continue to grow. In what ways are you continuing to grow? _____

What can you do to strengthen your bonds with family members and other people? _____

CHAPTER 5

In Crisis Together

When Jenny was born, the whole family — parents, brothers and sisters — celebrated Jenny's addition to the group. While her parents thought about what she would do when she grew up, her brothers and sisters simply looked forward to the time when they could hold her and show her off to others in the neighborhood.

Jenny was a healthy, happy baby — the joy that her family thought she would be. One morning Jenny's mother wondered how she could be sleeping so late. Checking her bed, she found that Jenny was dead. With her died a part of each person in the family. The other little ones couldn't understand why they never would be able to play with her again and had nightmares about being placed in the ground and covered with dirt.

Jenny's mother and father blamed each other for her death and spent their time together either in silence or arguing about every little thing. Finally, they decided that they couldn't live together anymore, and divorced. The family that had looked forward to Jenny's birth with such excitement never would be the same happy family again.

Julio's family waited for him to be born in the same way that Jenny's family waited for her. And Julio's family grieved in the same way when Julio suddenly died. But instead of being torn apart by the death, his family actually pulled together and became stronger.

Why the difference in reactions? Julio's family recognized that problems are a part of life and faced them rather than ignoring them or seeking to establish blame for them.

Julio's family turned to each other and to God for comfort and for strength instead of turning away from each other and from God.

Julio's family is a stronger family because they face crisis positively instead of being overcome by it. They don't like problems any better than any other family; and, yet, when problems come, the family pulls together and organizes around the person affected.

Often, people long for stability in their lives, seeking to escape the upset of change and crisis. But just the ordinary process of day-to-day life involves change. It is difficult to realize, but nothing is ever really the same. If it were, most people would be terribly bored.

Looking down at a sleeping child, parents may dream about what that child will do as an adult, or they may

wish they could keep him or her an infant for years to come. These thoughts are fine as long as the reality of life is recognized — we don't know what children will do when they grow up, nor is it reasonable to expect to keep them babies all their lives.

A baby given a rattle, learns all there is to learn about the rattle in a few minutes and, being bored, is ready to move on to some other experience. To expect a baby to play with the same rattle for a long period of time is as unreasonable as expecting family life to be exactly the same, day after day. Babies may have a favorite blanket or doll, but they normally play with lots of items around them. The blanket gives stability, and the other items help with stretching and growing.

Strong families have their security blankets and, at the same time, challenges which help them stretch and grow. The challenges include both the pleasant and the unpleasant. The security blanket is made up of many different fabrics: the respect family members feel for each other, the way they talk and listen to each other, the way they support one another in the pleasant and the unpleasant, the way they live their faiths, to name a few.

The 3-year-old afraid of an imaginary spider in his bedroom is facing a crisis as great for him as the more complex

concerns of his older relatives. His family organizing around him, rather than laughing at him and telling him that he is silly, is building the trust and confidence which will bond them together for his later challenges and problems which face the whole family.

The Biblical family of Jacob faced as many problems as any modern family. Bringing together children from different mothers, it reflects stresses faced by blended families today. The one characteristic of a strong family found in Jacob's family is the closeness to God. In spite of that closeness, the family suffered from petty jealousies, spitefulness, and favoritism. The hostility that his other brothers felt for Joseph is a result of Jacob favoring him over the other sons (Genesis 37:3-4).

When Jacob's sons lied to him and told him that his son Joseph had been killed, Jacob grieved for his lost son and refused to be comforted by his other children. He insisted that he would go to his own grave still mourning for his lost son (Genesis 37:33-35).

Jacob's loss of Joseph was a real tragedy. But what a tragedy for Jacob and his family as he rejected his other children in their attempt to comfort him!

In the first part of the book of Ruth, it appears as if Naomi will reject Ruth's comfort to wallow in her loss rather

than using the resource that God has given her in faithful Ruth.

Naomi's words as she arrived in Bethlehem reflect the depth of her grief as she says:

"Don't call me Naomi . . . call me Marah, because Almighty God has made my life bitter. When I left here, I had plenty, but the Lord has brought me back without a thing. Why call me Naomi when the Lord Almighty has condemned me and sent me trouble?" (Ruth 1:20-21).

Out of Naomi's and Ruth's losses came new life for both of them as they faced their problems together. Naomi's bitter feelings were real for her at the time, but the support that she gave and received helped her to be even stronger.

The best-known example in the Old Testament of a person facing one loss after another is Job. In spite of all his troubles, the Lord did remain with Job even when his friends could not support him.

Jacob and his family; Naomi and Ruth; Job; all faced different circumstances, but all were renewed after loss — with the help of a faithful God who was with them even though it didn't seem like it at the immediate time of loss.

The marvelous, mysterious story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead conveys the mixed feelings so many experience at a personal tragedy when they know that the gift of eternal life is theirs because of what Jesus does for us.

When Jesus stood with Mary and Martha at the graveside of Lazarus, He wept with them over the immediate loss which they all felt. Martha's testimony that Jesus is the Messiah speaks for all believers as they wrestle with the problems of the day in the face of the gift of eternity (John 11).

Listen to the words of Job:

"I know, Lord, that You are all-powerful; that You can do everything You want. You ask how I dare question Your wisdom when I am so very ignorant. I talked about things I did not understand, about marvels too great for me to know. You told me to listen while you spoke and to try to answer Your questions. In the past I knew only what others had told me, but now I have seen You with my own eyes" (Job 42:2-5).

TO THINK ABOUT

How do you react to crisis when it touches you? (Able to handle it alone, calmly, come apart, etc.) _____

Who are resource people for you in times of trouble? _____

What is your “security blanket” which gives you stability and the resources to cope with crisis? (Family, individuals, people at work or school) _____

Jacob, Ruth and Naomi, and Job were supported by God even though they couldn't see it at the time. Looking back on your own experiences, think of times when God supported you even though you were not aware at the time.

CHAPTER 6

In Faith Together In God . . .

Over the centuries governments supported religions and religions supported governments. Often there was a state religion — one religion supported by the rulers. People who believed in other ways were forced to suppress their own beliefs in favor of state religion. Many fled their homelands rather than worship in ways which were contrary to their faiths. Nations such as the United States were founded upon the idea of religious freedom.

“Separation of church and state!” That’s a principle of the United States which is to guarantee that no individual is forced to worship in a manner which violates his or her conscience.

But for many, separation of church and state has meant a gradual elimination of religion and the symbols of religion from everyday life. The family Bible was important because it testified to a faithful God who sent His Son Jesus Christ, reflected the beliefs of the family members, and contained the names of several generations of the family. At a time when government records were not so exact, the family Bible chronicled who the family was. On display in a prominent place in the sitting room of the parents’ home, it was treated with awe and respect by even younger family

members. Many of us can remember sitting next to our parents as they read the marvelous stories from the Bible. We can remember staring at the names which we couldn't read ourselves, but which we knew were the names of relatives living and dead who were part of our family.

In many cultures, the Bible has disappeared from the sitting/living room to be replaced by a television set as the center of the room. And families bemoan their loss of roots and the fact that they no longer seem to find time to pray together privately or worship together publicly. They hear the slogan, "The family that prays together stays together," and, yet, don't know how to establish such patterns in the face of a world which seems to value sporting events more than worship celebrations.

As we look back, we think that our families were somehow stronger because they openly and gratefully acknowledged their ties to previous generations and their spiritual roots.

Strong families today are still families which find time to live their faiths. They do worship together, pray together, serve each other in the family, reach out to others, and keep God central in their lives.

Six-year-old twins came in from play asking, "Mommy, Mommy, who is

Jesus?" Their parents were "good" parents who never found time for worship in their lives or in any way sharing their faith with their children.

Mother decided that it was time that the children found out about Jesus, so she took them to church and Sunday school even though Dad didn't attend with her the first few times.

Dad did become a regular worshipper also, and they joyfully reported that their family life changed when they began to live their faith in Jesus Christ. Observers, too, could see that they were a different family.

Before experiencing Christ and the closeness of His church, happiness meant isolating themselves from those around them. They were a self-contained world in their own little house, concerned about protecting their children from the negatives of society and from the different lifestyles and beliefs of people who would "force their ideas on the children."

Suddenly, they found themselves opening their home to others, as their lives became part of the neighborhood in which they lived and the church in which they worshipped. Previously known as "nice" people who kept to themselves, they became a family which was able to reach out to others and serve as an example of Christians who are

part of their world rather than apart from it.

The prophet Daniel is an example of a person living in a culture hostile to God who continued to worship God faithfully and lived life joyfully even though his beliefs often directly clashed with the practices of the people around him. Through faith, Daniel was in partnership with God who protected him in the midst of a world that seemed so much more powerful. The story of Daniel and his friends being brought to the court of Nebuchadnezzar and remaining faithful contains enough drama to match any story ever (Daniel 1).

Children through the ages have marvelled at Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego being thrown into the fiery furnace and being protected by angels of God (Daniel 3). And Daniel — in the den of hungry lions because of his faith — stirs the heart of anybody who has heard the roar of a lion or seen an animal tamer work with ferocious-looking animals (Daniel 6).

But the stories are more than romantic tales of goodness persevering against the unfaithful. They tell also of a faithful God supporting people, re-enforcing people. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were young boys taken from their families. They formed a family of their own around their faith in God in the midst of a

society which wanted to change them to conform to that society.

Esther and her uncle Mordecai formed a family of faith and were able to build each other up as God used Esther to rescue His chosen people. The fourth chapter of Esther rivals any story written for intrigue, but it also is a prime example of family members working together to live out their faith as the stronger re-enforces the weaker.

Certainly it is more pleasant to live in a culture which supports the worship of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; but God supports people — as individuals and in families — no matter what happens around them.

“Sing a new song to the Lord! Sing to the Lord, all the world! Sing to the Lord, and praise Him! Proclaim every day the good news that He has saved us. Proclaim His glory to the nations, His mighty deeds to all peoples” (Psalm 96:1-3).

TO THINK ABOUT

Look back over the questions from the other chapters and see if there is a plan emerging to strengthen your relationships to your family or friends and to God. List some specific ideas (be a better listener, recognize people resources, live a more active faith life):

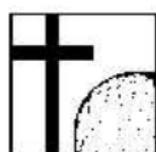
Think about your prayer life and worship life. Are you able to pray with other people? _____

What do you need to do to improve your prayer life? _____

What can you and your family or friends do to serve other people?

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Life Together

What is a family? People have many different answers to that question because families come in all sizes and shapes. Some people would include neighbors or close friends as part of their family. For others, it's as simple as "the people I live with."

This booklet explores the rich and diverse context in which God defines families on earth and examines the behaviors and attitudes that characterize strong, healthy relationships. A special section at the end of each chapter will encourage you to examine your own situation and the thoughts and attitudes that shape your view of family. Then, you will be offered an opportunity to think about ways that you can nurture and grow in those relationships



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