



A topical video study derived from the CCEF National Conference on Family

FAMILY

Embracing the Blessing and Facing the Brokenness

with David Powlison,
Alasdair Groves,
Edward T. Welch,
Steve Midgley,
Jayne V. Clark,
Julie Lowe,
Steve Casey,
and Michael Emlet

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Family—Embracing the Blessing & Facing the Brokenness
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Speakers in order of appearance:

David Powlison, MDiv, PhD
Alasdair Groves, MDiv
Edward T. Welch, MDiv, PhD
Steve Midgley, MA, MB BS, DipMin
Jayne V. Clark, MAR
Julie Lowe, MA, LPC
Steve Casey
Michael Emlet, MDiv, MD

Curriculum Development

Bruce E. Eaton, MDiv
Rebecca Eaton, MA

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Customer Service
1803 East Willow Grove Avenue
Glenside, PA 19038
customerservice@ccef.org

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FAMILY

Embracing the Blessing & Facing the Brokenness

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Getting Started	2
Family—Blessing & Brokenness <i>David Powlison</i>	5
Shaking Up the Family Tree: God Does the Unexpected <i>Alasdair Groves</i>	12
Now & Then: The Returns of Family History <i>Edward T. Welch</i>	23
God Redeems Family <i>Steve Midgley</i>	32
Every Single Family Member <i>Jayne V. Clark</i>	42
Nurturing Family <i>Julie Lowe</i>	52
Families Helping People in Crisis <i>Steve Casey</i>	61
Busy Families <i>Michael Emlet</i>	70
Family Devotions <i>Alasdair Groves</i>	80
Group Handouts	90
About the Speakers	99

Getting Started

About the Series

Family—embracing the blessing & facing the brokenness is part of a CCEF series of topical studies for individuals and groups. This series is prepared for people seeking to grow in their discipleship relationship with Jesus and to learn how to come alongside others in need. Each study helps you to develop a biblical perspective on important topics that address counseling-related needs in the church. You will have opportunities in this study to learn the content and apply it to your own life and ministry context.

Other topics include:

- Emotions: Understanding and Expressing the Heart
- Psychiatric Disorders: A biblical approach to understanding complex problems
- Loss: A biblical approach to understanding how God transforms our sorrows
- Growing Together: A biblical approach to fruitful ministry in the body of Christ
- Uncovering Shame & Guilt: How Jesus enters our experience

About this Study

There is something unique about the impact our family relationships have on us. Family can bless us so wonderfully, but at the same time it can also cause us so much pain. Why is this? The first reason is that family really matters. It matters to us, and it matters to God. And what matters always brings with it deeper impressions and greater emotions. The second reason is that God created us with a desire to connect with those closest to us and to be a part of something God intended for our good. But families, just like individuals, struggle with both suffering and sin. This means that even as we enjoy God's blessings in family, we will still struggle with the brokenness that is a part of living in a fallen world.

This study looks at the subject of family from a variety of perspectives, but every perspective brings us back to an essential truth. As believers in Jesus, we belong not only to a biological family but also to the family of God. In Jesus Christ we are adopted daughters and sons, part of a spiritual household, and we have God as our Father and Jesus as our older brother. So while personal history and family history are important, they do not define us or provide the final word on who we are or what is to become of us. As Christians, we are defined by the One who made us. We are not defined by our family successes, our family failures, or even by the presence of family relationships at all. Instead, we are defined by our relationship with the living God, and this relationship is precisely what enables us to embrace the joys and face the brokenness in our lives and in our families. This study will help believers in a variety of family circumstances with the pressures they face as they seek to engage meaningfully in family life.

Summary of Each Lesson

Lesson 1: Family is filled with both blessing and with brokenness, and sometimes in the context of family you experience both at the same time. This lesson reminds us that we are defined by our relationship with the living God, no matter what we have experienced in our family of origin.

Lesson 2: God shakes up our idea of what family ought to be in order to show us that there is room in his family for everyone. In Scripture we learn that even people with messy stories are an important part of God's family tree.

Lesson 3: Family history has an important influence on our lives. This lesson asks you to consider how your family history has impacted you and provides a way to help others consider their family histories.

Lesson 4: Throughout his ministry, Jesus showed us the trajectory that family is taking. This lesson discusses the reality of a redeemed family of God: Jesus redefined family, the Spirit renewed family, and the Father adopted us into his family.

Lesson 5: Family means more than marriage and children. Singles are a part of families, both biological families and God's family. This lesson shares how to cultivate an undistracted relationship with the Lord.

Lesson 6: This lesson introduces three important ways we nurture our families: we nurture relationships, we nurture conversations, and we nurture Christ-like identity. Nurturing family means we will need to empty ourselves on a regular basis in order to walk in love.

Lesson 7: Take a moment to consider how your family can become a source of blessing and care for people who are in crisis. It can seem daunting at times. Perhaps you feel too busy or perhaps you feel like you don't have much to offer. This lesson provides a vision for how families can be a place of comfort, strength, and solace to strugglers.

Lesson 8: The challenge of busyness is accentuated in family life. The goal of this lesson is to help you consider and reflect on the busyness in your life as you work to embrace the God-given rhythms of work and rest that bring nourishment and not depletion to your family life.

Lesson 9: The Bible commands us to nurture worship in our immediate family. Family devotions are one great way to do that. This lesson explores a variety of questions people have about devotions. How should you think biblically about family devotions? Does Scripture command you to do family devotions? If so, what specifically does it prescribe you to do?

About the Workbook

Each section of the Workbook includes a *Before You Begin* activity. Immediately following is the *Lesson Overview* which may be helpful to read prior to starting the video. Talks conclude with a *Reflection Activity* followed by *Study Questions*.

This Workbook can be used at two different levels for group study. For an in-depth study, both leader and participants purchase a Workbook for study and reflection. For an introductory study, the group leader can purchase a Workbook and use the Handouts in the back to facilitate a group discussion.

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Family—Blessing & Brokenness

David Powlison

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Take a moment and think about your family. In the space below reflect and respond to these questions. What image first comes to your mind? Is what you see warm and inviting? Or is it dark and cold? Is it full and vibrant? Or is it empty? Does it live up to a standard, or fall short?

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Who or what did you see when you thought about your family? How did you feel?

INTRODUCTION

Whatever your situation or experience, whether single or married, old or young, whatever roles you have, this study will help you to face the brokenness and embrace the blessing of family in your life.

STORIES OF FAMILY

Sometimes pictures convey meaning in a way words fail to.

Broken and Blessed

Our first picture is of David Powlison and his younger brother Dan. According to David, as a child Dan was the rascal in the family. He caused more laughter and joy in the family than the other family members put together. He also caused more consternation and trouble for his parents than the rest of them put together.

As an adult, Dan was the primary caretaker for David's mother for the long, slow three years of her dying. As you grow up, you leave, you cleave, and you move on with your life. But Dan's words at his mother's funeral were the single most significant thing said, "You know, you love your mom, but walking with mom during these three years of her decline and her great need, I grew to really love her." In a nutshell, that's a story of what is broken and blessed—a long and vibrant life ends with the slow and hard death of a parent.

A Young Boy

David's grandson, little two-and-a-half year old Ezra, delighted his family as his mother Hannah came down the stairs. Hannah was wearing a beautiful robe given to her by her parents. It was cream and had bright red flowers on it. As Ezra saw his mom he said, "Mama, you're beautiful. Sing, Mama, sing!" It was a scene that brings absolute delight to a family.

Later at dinnertime however, Ezra was instructed by his mother to take cookies and place them on each plate in the dining room. When Ezra came out of the kitchen, he just stopped and looked at the plate. His mother gently reminded him to put one on each person's plate. Ezra rebelled, "I don't want to share. I want all the cookies. I want all the cookies!" His parents were dismayed, but it is still something you can laugh at given his age.

Blessing and Brokenness on the Same Day

In this life there will be an entanglement of all that is good and all that is evil. Joy and sorrow somehow meet and occur together.

The morning of Friday September 22nd began with tremendous joy. David's daughter Gwen gave birth to their fourth daughter, Charlotte. It was an answer to prayer. Their family had just

been through a hurricane. Gwen had experienced hard pregnancies in the past, followed by hard births. Yet this was a remarkably easy birth. A charming moment happened several months earlier, before they knew they were having a girl. One of the other daughter's said, "Mom, I really want our baby to be a girl. Four girls. That's impressive!"

The evening of Friday September 22nd ended with tremendous heartache. David received the shocking news from his son that his nephew had died of a heroin overdose. David then had the heartbreaking task of informing his daughters.

David and his entire family experienced whiplash that day. The day began with such joy and ended with such sorrow.

David's nephew was a delightful young man. He was friendly, amiable, and goodhearted. He was a great athlete in high school until he had a serious injury. He became hooked on prescription drugs and eventually heroin came into his life. He spent many years in and out of drug rehabilitation. He made progress and then would backslide. Recently it seemed as though he was on a good trajectory, until he was discovered dead.

David's family was reeling. His daughter Hannah said, "We know that terrible and wonderful things happen every day in this world. But our family is small, and these two things happened on the same day—something so wonderful and something so tragic."

A popular saying in the rehabilitation world goes like this, "Addiction is a special kind of hell. It takes the soul of the addict and breaks the hearts of everyone who loves them." Addiction, like all problems, is not just an individual problem. It is a family problem.

THE GOAL OF THIS STUDY

This is the intersection of our study—where blessing and brokenness join in every person's life. The goal of our study is to embrace the blessing and face the brokenness. But how do we do this?

- How can we learn to embrace the good things without those good things becoming idolatrous?
- How do we face the hard things without despairing?
- How do we embrace what is good in the right way, just as we face what is bad in the right way?

Our Starting Place

We begin by exploring *who we are* and *what defines us*.

Family is significant and important, but it does not define us. Our roles do not define us. Our family

status does not define us. Our family history does not define us.

There are many important things in our life, but none define us.

- Our health matters, but if it defined us we would despair when our health took a turn to the darkness.
- Our jobs don't define us, or we would be cursed when we had to retire.
- Friendships don't define us, or we would be wrecked by a friend's betrayal.
- Our church or our denomination doesn't define us, or we would be in despair when a disagreement over theology or practice arose.
- We are not defined by our ethnic background, whether it is exalted or despised.

Relationship with God

We are defined by someone else. Our relationship with the living God is what matters most. This relationship is precisely what enables us to embrace the joys and face the darkness in our lives. This relationship allows us to accept and not be ruled by our family circumstances.

Whatever your family history, your current family role, your current family situation, or even what will occur in the future, you must get who you are straight. Who you are is defined by the fact that you belong to Jesus Christ. You have been bought with his blood. You have been given the identity of a child who says, "Abba, Father."

God is gracious to you, even when you face brokenness. He is always up to something good in your life.

REFLECT ON WHAT YOU HEARD

Our families can't and shouldn't define us. Yet we acknowledge that our families play a significant role in influencing who we are and how we live. Reflect on these questions in the space provided:

1. What aspect of your family feels incomplete or uncertain?

2. Where do you long to embrace the blessing of family in your life?

3. Where do you need to grow as you face the brokenness in your family?

4. How specifically do you want to grow through this study?

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STUDY QUESTIONS

The following questions explore the idea David introduced in his talk. Our starting place when it comes to thinking about *family* is to consider *who we are* and what defines us.

1. What defines you when it comes to family? Is it your family history, your family role, your family's current situation, or what could occur in your family in the future?
2. Where are you relying on God to accomplish his purpose for your family and where do you put your trust in something else to accomplish your goals?
3. Read Romans 8:14–17. How does this passage define who you are? How does it define what family you are a part of in Christ?

Because you are in God's family, he is at work conforming you into the image of his Son (Romans 8:29). This is called the process of sanctification. Sanctification is the process of our hearts, minds, and desires being brought into greater conformity with Jesus'. The following questions focus on how you become more like Jesus in your family relationships as you embrace blessing and face brokenness.¹

1. Reflect on a moment or season in your life when you experienced the whiplash of blessing and brokenness at the same time. What was that experience like for you? How did it impact your family relationships? In what ways were you like Jesus, and in what ways did you see your need to be sanctified?
2. What changes might you experience in your daily life if you embraced the “intersection of joy and sorrow, brokenness and blessing” that family really is? How might your heart change? How might your attitude (the dominant tone of your relationship with others) change? How might your words change and your actions change? What could and should be different when you embrace the joining of both blessing and brokenness in family?
3. As you go through this study, how can you use the theme of blessing and brokenness as a way to evaluate how you contribute to your family relationships? How do you bless your family members? How do you contribute to brokenness? Is there one particular change you can identify that you can make that will help your family in terms of blessing and brokenness?

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¹ For more information on the topics of sanctification and suffering, reference *How Does Sanctification Work?* (2017) and *God's Grace in Your Suffering* (2018) by David Powlison, published by Crossway Publishers.

INTRODUCTION

It is a wonderful thing that the body of Christ is a family. And it is a wonderful thing that God has given us families. But there are many people who don't feel the joy of family in their lives. Family isn't what they expected it to be—both the biological family and the church family. Many people have had family experiences that they would not have chosen for themselves. And for some people, church experiences can intensify their experience of brokenness.

THE EXPERIENCE OF BROKENNESS IN FAMILY

Family is highly valued in our churches, and this is increasingly countercultural in society. To value, love and treasure family is a wonderful blessing the church has been given. But if you are someone whose family experience is broken or unfulfilled, it can be really hard to watch other families in church whose experience seems to be better than your own. Yet, it is important to remember that the smiling faces you see on a Sunday morning may be hiding many unspoken sorrows of their own.

When we think about the brokenness that is a part of family, we shouldn't seek comfort in the thought that "everyone is messed up." While this may be true, we must keep in mind that the experience of family for some is especially disappointing. This truth makes it important to remember that God's family has room for everyone, no matter what.

Andy Crouch wrote, "While not everyone lives in a single-family home with kids underfoot, everyone has a family. As a Christian, I actually don't believe the biological family is the main place we are meant to be known and loved in a way that leads to wisdom and courage. The church is and can be family for everyone in a way that biological families cannot."¹

This statement provides the foundation for the hope we have. *There is room in God's family for everyone.* This truth is where we should begin when we consider brokenness in family.

Here are a few specific ways the broken and unanticipated can be experienced in family.

- Loneliness
- Singleness when you desire marriage
- Wild family secrets revealed unexpectedly
- Awkward marriages
- Children who wander from the faith
- Divorce from your spouse
- Divorce from your parents
- Significant handicaps or special needs

- Infertility
- Infidelity
- Addiction
- Fall from grace in ministry
- Being defined by your sin publicly
- Becoming a refugee

The list of potential ways family life can be unexpected is endless. Family is both formative and fragile. As a result, when something strains a family, it affects each family member for life.

WHEN FAMILY BRANCHES OUT IN UNEXPECTED WAYS

Sometimes family trees branch in surprising ways. In this lesson we will consider two things. First, we will think about God's big-picture plan for his whole family. Then we will consider God's little-picture plan for individual families. This lesson, along with David Powlison's introduction, will lay a foundation for thinking about some fundamental truths as we develop a biblical understanding of family.

God Shakes Up His Family Tree

Have you thought about the fact that God chooses to shake up his own family tree? Why didn't God give us a Bible full of perfect families with perfect stories that would be examples for us to emulate? There are no perfect families in Scripture. CCEF Faculty member Julie Lowe often invites her classes to come up with one. They will offer possibilities, but as they do, they realize that every single family in all of Scripture has tragic flaws in it.

God's own marriage is broken. God gets married to Israel and after numerous, repeated infidelities they get a divorce. God then pursues her and brings her back. God ultimately sends his Son to rescue his bride. What a strange thing that God chooses to enter our brokenness and shake up his family tree by including us.

There are two main themes in Scripture that show us God's character as he expands his family tree.

God Includes Unexpected People in His Family

First, throughout Scripture we see God include unexpected people in his family tree.

- Abraham was a normal man living in Ur of the Chaldeans. He was called by God to leave and to go to an unknown place. He marries Sarah but cannot have children. So Hagar, his concubine and an Egyptian slave, becomes the mother of his son.

- Consider Tamar and Judah. Judah maintains a good name throughout most of the Bible, but in Genesis 38 he is put to shame by the righteousness of his daughter-in-law, and then shamed again by her manipulation to perpetuate the family line. What a strange story, that Tamar should be given this place at the table and Judah the hero, the patriarch acknowledges his failure.
- What about Rahab in Jericho?
- What about Ruth the Moabitess, the foreigner who comes to be the great-grandmother of King David?
- What about Bathsheba the wife of Uriah the Hittite, who becomes the mother of Solomon?
- How about Solomon, the son of that union?
- How about Israel in general? What a strange and unexpected people for God to choose. He had Egypt. He had Babylon. He had Persia. He had Assyria. God could have chosen any of these much greater empires, and he chose this unexpected people.
- And then you move into the New Testament and you see Saul (of all people) becoming the apostle Paul. He was a persecutor of Christians and an unexpected person to draw into God's family.
- What about the Gentiles? What about you? What an unexpected set of choices.

The lesson from all of these stories—anyone can be included in God's family. Even people with messy stories are part of God's family tree.

God Includes Weak People in His Family

Second, God doesn't just draw unexpected people; he draws weak people into his family.

- The opening chapter of the New Testament of the gospel of Jesus Christ begins with a list of names: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary the virgin. What a strange set of weak people. These are women we would assume have no chance of being a part of the lineage of the Lord of the universe.

- It is a common story in Scripture that the younger brother is elevated over the older brother(s).
 - Gideon is elevated over his brothers.
 - Isaac is elevated over Ishmael.
 - Jacob over Esau.
 - Joseph over all of his brothers.
 - Joseph's son Ephraim is elevated over Manasseh.
 - King David over his brothers.
- There is also a common theme of infertility. Sarah becomes a mother. Hannah gives birth to Samuel. Sampson is born.
- The first people have tragic weaknesses—Adam and Eve, Seth and Cain. Yet God is pleased to work his family in and through them.

God's Power at Work through Weakness

These stories teach us that anyone can be a part of God's family. God works through families that are not perfect, and he makes it very clear through these stories of brokenness that it is his power at work through human weakness (2 Corinthians 12:8–10).

When we think about how God's big purposes are accomplished, we have to notice that (as is often the case with the large themes of Scripture) that this theme of the unexpected and weak being drawn into God's family comes perfectly together in Jesus. Talk about unexpected!

The Lord of the universe is born in a stable, to an as-yet-unmarried woman. What a strange thing—a baby with swaddling clothes in a manger. What could be weaker than a baby? What could be more unexpected than God in a manger? Jesus knows what it is to come unexpectedly and weakly into the experience of family.

GOD SHAKES UP OUR FAMILIES: WHY?

God shakes up his family tree to show us that there is a place for everyone, and that he is working. It is his glory, *his* power, his fingerprints, and his gentle touch that causes things to grow and to thrive.

What does this imply? What does it tell us about our own families? How do we move from God's big purposes for everyone to God's purposes for us? Consider these three explanations for why God shakes up our own family trees.

Breaking Down Assumptions of Family

First, God shakes up our families to break down our expectations of what families should be. God knows how easy it is for any family in any culture to get sucked into worshipping at the altar of family in whatever way a culture may dictate.

Pastor Tim Keller often asks, "What is the difference between the culture in which the Scriptures were written and our own?" For ancient cultures in the Bible, the perpetuation of the family name was the most important goal of life. As individualists today, it is very difficult for us to understand or relate to that reality.

A person's identity, purpose, value, and worth came from filling their role in advancing the family. The greatest success a person could have is for the family to continue. When God talks about children as a blessing and gift, the original hearers would affirm it, "Yes, I know, they are my life. That is what it means for me to continue as a person, to have hope."

Our modern culture tends to think differently about the family. The altar of family can be an altar of success, not perpetuation. "If I produce the right kind of family, then that will say something really good about me." On the other hand, family can also be viewed as an obstacle—a hindrance to self-actualization.

Broken families wake us up to the fact that we are workaholics, to the fact that we want our family to be a convenient, easy, smooth thing. Family is there when we want it or need it, so that we can get about the real business of life.

Sometimes God shakes up our families because he loves us enough to want us to see the wrong expectations we have for what a family should be.

God Uses Hard Things to Strengthen Us

Second, God strengthens us in the midst of trials.

In colder climates farmers need to start plants as seeds in a greenhouse. Families, in a good sense, are like greenhouses. A good greenhouse protects a young plant when the outside world is harsh and destructive and dangerous. Indeed, a bad greenhouse is a terrible thing for a little plant needing sun and needing protection. But staying in the greenhouse was never

the goal. In the same way, having a nurturing family that keeps you safe and comfortable has never been the goal. The goal has always been to be outside, to be in a harsh and cold and difficult world, and to grow there and to bear fruit that will last.

Sometimes plants are transplanted before they are ready, and in many cases this causes damage and hurt. And yet there is something incredibly powerful about the reality that God is a good gardener, and even if someone has been brought out of the greenhouse too soon or has spent their entire life in the cold, God will cause them to thrive.

Alasdair relates a story of his mother, who took a tour on Mount Washington. Mount Washington is the highest mountain in the region and has the worst weather in the world. As they drove up the mountain, they passed the tree line. Their tour guide said, "I want you to look out your window right as we come around the next curve, I have something to show you. You see that right there? That is the only tree above the tree line on Mount Washington." Alasdair's mother reflected on the very tiny tree, "It was the least impressive tree you've ever seen. It's this tiny little tree, barely more than a shrub. You probably have plants in your front yard bigger than this tree, and yet the beauty of this tree, the incredible magnificence of this tree was not that it was so grand and tall and amazing in and of itself, but rather that it was there above the tree line in the harshest weather in the world."

Some of you are like that little tree. You look at your life and you say, "What have I accomplished? Why is my family such a mess? What could we ever hope to produce? I have failed. My family is not what it ought to be."

In God's way of seeing the world, we can have this beautiful appreciation for the glory of a little tree that survives in the harshest of environments. One that has been brought out of the greenhouse far too early, that is facing the harsh wind and surviving because God has fed and nurtured and cared for it wherever he put it. The glory of this tiny tree is not that it is soaring and lofty; its glory is that it is alive.

God sometimes uses painful trials in families to strengthen and make them what we could not otherwise be, giving them a heartiness and a strength that could not otherwise be had.

God Loves to Restore Family

Third, God delights to restore the nuclear family to their rightful place of blessing his world. This was his intention from the very beginning.

Adam and Eve were given the promise of a seed from their family who would come and restore the human race (Genesis 3:15).

Abraham was given the promise, 'I will bless your family and make your family a blessing to the nations' (Genesis 12:2–3).

God's point has always been for families, through the biological process and the intimate bonds of life lived and shared, to be fundamentally outward. God wants families to bless the nations, to be at peace, and to overflow with the power of the Spirit in them.

God's vision for families is that they will grow and bear fruit. From a human perspective, trees provide shade and beauty. There is a vision built into creation for family to be a thriving, flourishing, wild, seed-casting, wind-blowing, Spirit of God picking it up and carrying it to the ends of the earth blessing, so that there might be shade and fruit. That is God's vision for families, that they would be a part of his redemption.

BECOMING OAKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The prophet Isaiah says, and Jesus will later claim these words as the mantle of his ministry, 'I have come, and the Spirit of the Lord is upon me that I would preach good news, that I would unbind prisoners, that I would bring light into darkness, and favor, and blessing' (Isaiah 61:1–3). And the passage ends with, 'I've come to make oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord.'

Oaks of righteousness points to the kingdom coming, and families are meant to participate in the kingdom by growing and scattering. And sometimes God shakes up the family because the 'apple hasn't fallen far enough from the tree.' Families need a windstorm to pick them up and move them out. This can be seen again and again in Scripture, and it can be heard again and again from people who are seeking to make sense of their lives in the face of family hardships and a good God who has been faithful.

The story of history has always been a shocking story of family expansion. God himself is family in the Trinity. God was content with no human beings; there was perfect fellowship and harmony before matter came into being. Yet God brought us in. He made us children. Every moment of every person who has ever lived on this planet is an outworking of a God who brings new people into his family. We become his children.

Yet, the metaphor of children is not the final metaphor in Scripture. The final metaphor is of a wedding. God has, from the beginning of history, sought a bride and he has brought her to himself to delight in her and to restore her. He has made himself family with this woman, and he has been willing to chase her down through every twist and turn when she has run from him. And God will continue to pursue us because Jesus Christ will have his Bride. You and I are part of the story of family that God has delighted to put together since the beginning, and he will not fail.

REFLECT ON WHAT YOU HEARD

The Bible’s story of family history has always been a shocking story of family expansion—filled with twists and turns. And more often than not, that story has included painful and broken parts. It is a beautiful thing that God has made room for us in his family and that he has given us a vision for how to live our lives. Yet even if we believe and experience these truths, it can be hard to live with the painful parts of our own stories.

Use the space below to reflect. How have you seen God weave your story into his? Have you seen God build his kingdom in the midst of pain? What ways has he shaken up your family tree? What has been the hardest part for you? What surprise blessings did you discover?

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STUDY QUESTIONS

1. God loves to restore family to its rightful place of blessing in this world. He does this by orienting us to move toward others in love so that we can be a blessing. In what ways has God shown you that your family can be a blessing? How can you grow as a source of blessing in this world?
2. Reflect on the reasons Alasdair gave for why God shakes up family. (To break down our expectation of what family should be. To strengthen us in the midst of trials. To restore the nuclear family to a place of blessing this world.) Which reason resonates most with your experience? Which reason troubles you the most?
3. This lesson points us to the reality that God sent his Son in order to restore his family relationship with lost people (Ephesians 1:5). And that has been the consistent pattern of how God's love is expressed toward us. Individually we become his sons and daughters, and together we become his bride. How does this gospel truth of inclusion and belonging help you to think about the role of family and individual family members in this world? How does it help you think about the potential for brokenness to be reversed and become blessing?
4. The brokenness we experience in family is formative and sometimes the strain it creates can affect each family member for life. How has (or could) God use these experiences in your family to bring about good? How can these experiences be viewed in light of Scripture? Have you seen how God's grace and power has been 'made perfect in your weaknesses'? (2 Corinthians 12:8–10)
5. Read Matthew 1:1–17. God includes unexpected people in his family. Notice the surprising names that are included in Jesus' genealogy. Why is it striking that women (who were viewed as weak by society) were included? Think of the men who are listed and what you know from the Bible about their lives. Why should some of them have been excluded from God's family? How does God show his love for us through his own family story?
6. Read Ephesians 2:11–22. How does this passage describe how it is that God drew you into his family? How does Paul describe the unexpectedness of this inclusion?
7. Read Galatians 3:23–4:7. How does this passage describe the way you are connected to Christ's lineage, a lineage leading all the way back to Abraham? How does this passage cast a vision for what it means to live as a child of God?
8. Our culture can have a powerful influence on how we value our children. How do you think your attitude and commitment to your own family has been impacted by the culture you live in?
9. Read Isaiah 61:1–3. God makes a promise to turn your family into an oak of righteousness. How

can you envision your family helping to scatter and grow the kingdom of God in your community?

10. God repeatedly chose to shake up his own family tree by including unexpected and weak people. How can God's example influence what risks you are willing to take to include others into your family?

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¹ Crouch, Andy, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017).

Now & Then: The Returns of Family History

Ed Welch

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

In this lesson we focus on the important topic of family history. The question we are considering is, *How has your family of origin influenced you?* The doorway we take into this topic is through what we will call an “iconic story.” An iconic story is a representative event that illustrates larger themes from your childhood that have shaped who you are today. An iconic story captures something of yourself and the home in which you were raised. Was your home secure and predictable? Or was your home characterized by war, abuse, capriciousness, alcohol, lies, and broken promises? Does your iconic story capture loneliness and isolation, or inclusion and love?

Think about an important story from your past that played a significant role in shaping who you are (and how you view your family relationships) today. Write that story below.

INTRODUCTION

What is your iconic story? An iconic story is not simply an incident from your childhood. An iconic story is a representative event that illustrates larger themes from your childhood that have shaped who you are today. This lesson explores the importance of family history in people's lives.

An Illustration

Consider the 75 year-old woman whose husband of 55 years spoke horrible words to her and made accusations against her in front of other people. She had no response and said nothing in return. Based on her response it seemed that this was a typical occurrence.

Ed said, "I knew her well enough to recognize that the accusations were clearly wrong. The accusations were malicious, but they were also inaccurate. Over time, I eventually asked her the question, 'What happens when you hear these accusations from your husband?'"

The woman went back to her iconic story—the story of a girl who had gone from one foster home to another. And whenever someone raised their voice, it meant that she could be going into another foster home. That didn't mean that the foster home she was in was that great, but who knew what kind of foster home she was heading to next. So, whenever there was anger, she froze. She was absolutely silent.

YOUR CHILDHOOD HOUSE

An iconic story captures something of yourself and the home in which you were raised. Was your home secure and predictable? Or was your home characterized by war, unpredictability, abuse, capriciousness, alcohol, lies, and broken promises? Does your story capture loneliness and isolation?

If you want to help people identify their iconic stories, the first step is to think of your own iconic story. Then this idea of a representative, iconic story can be broadened out into how this can be done with other people. There are two questions to consider.

What is your iconic story?

What were the rules, traditions, and culture of the home in which you were raised?

Describe Your Story

The meal table can be a helpful way to capture the particular culture of a home. Some people cannot remember a day when they didn't have a meal with their family. For someone with this background, entering a friend's house and not seeing a kitchen or dining room table for the family to gather around will reveal something different about the culture in that home.

We can ask two questions as we consider the rules, the traditions, and the culture in which we were raised. Start with the following two questions to better understand the culture in which you were raised.

How does your story inform who you are?

What did the rules and traditions of your home communicate about who God is?

How did your story inform who you are?

How does your story shape your own identity or your self-definition? One way to answer this question is to think of the answer as occurring along a continuum of belonging. On one side of the continuum you belong, and on the other side you don't belong. You are either *in or out*. To belong or not belong is a prominent human continuum of experience.

How does your family of origin, the house in which you were raised, and the shepherds that you had, shape your life now and your understanding of yourself? Were you wanted, loved, and secure? Or was another person clearly favored? Were you known and understood? Or were you unknown and misunderstood? Were you *in*, or were you more *out* as you consider this particular spectrum?

What did the rules and traditions in your home communicate about who God is?

Take time to consider who the Lord was for you in your home. How was God reflected in other people? Here are two illustrations.

Consider the man who grew up in Afghanistan. As his country was being rebuilt he wondered, where are our people and where is our God? As he looked around, the answer he found to those questions were the Christians who were helping to rebuild, and serving people in Jesus' name. As this man tells his own story, he would say that this was the moment of his conversion, when he wanted to follow the God of those who served him so well.

A woman has some interest in Jesus, yet she remains distant. She engages in biblical conversations, but is reluctant about Christians. As you come to know her better, you realize her father was a pastor and had been treated very poorly by his congregation. As a young girl she witnessed it all. These experiences made her feel that *if this is the God that these people worship, I don't want to be a member of such a group.*

Who are you? How has your answer been shaped by your own family experience? And then, if you dig a little deeper, *Who is your God?* Is he harsh, is he picky, is he peeved, is he distant? Focusing on an iconic story that represents the larger culture (the rules and traditions) from your childhood can help you to answer these questions.

How do you carry your story with you?

Our past speaks to our present. How do you carry these representative stories and the larger culture of your childhood home with you as you answer these questions: Who am I? Who is God?

How does your past influence you today? Is your past characterized by a series of laws that made it necessary for you to always seek approval? Is your past defined by a sense of worthlessness, because you have always been *out*? Does your past inform your fears? Does your past inform your shame and your guilt, your pain in life today? How is your past carried with you?

A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF FAMILY HISTORY

Learning how to identify and describe your iconic story provides an elementary foray into thinking about your past. Perhaps you have noticed some patterns, or you have noticed something that is a bit more alarming. Perhaps you have noticed that your past speaks more loudly than you had anticipated. For many people, at this point, the story is over. Secular counselors summarize the past by simply stating a need to not make the same mistakes in the future. But *we* as biblical counselors are just getting started.

Moving to a New House

As Christians we move from an old house with old shepherds to a new house and a new Shepherd. And there are at least two different ways to enter this new house.

One way to enter this new house is through your old house and your old shepherds. If this is you, your house was built by wisdom and is characterized by stewardship. Your shepherds pointed you to the new house and the new Shepherd. As you enter the new house, it feels almost like a natural walk.

There is another way to enter the new house. You were cast out into the street. The new Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, came and found you. He rescued you and brought you into this new house.

Both ways of entering the new house involve saying, *Jesus, I do. I'm with you. I trust you.* That is the human expression of moving into the new house.

Yet even when we move into the new house, our old stories, our old houses, and our old shepherds can continue to exert influence over us.

The film *The Count of Monte Cristo* highlights how a past home can deeply influence how a person relates to a new home. The Count of Monte Cristo's servant discovers him lying on the floor rather than in his bed. Even though he was living in the palace, he was still living out of the old house that had informed so much of his life.

So often the old house and the old shepherds can dominate our present life. Our task in this reality is to move into our past, identify all the significant portions of it, and leave nothing significant unaffected by the fact that we now live in a new house with a new Shepherd.

Connecting to Scripture by the Spirit

Another way to understand your past is to identify what themes and passages in Scripture capture your attention.

You might be captured by the words in Revelation to the church in Laodicea, and you are the one who is going to be spit out of the Lord's mouth.

You may read through the parables, and you think you are among the virgins who have not been prepared.

The words "I'm determined to know nothing but Christ and him crucified" were not merely a short sermon by the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 2:2). They are the refrain of the people who enter the new house.

To enter this new house we must understand what Christ has done for us. We understand this as the Spirit works through the Word. What Christ has done is *the* representative story. We have entered into a new kingdom, with a new Shepherd and a new house.

The Representative Story

Jesus' story is the representative story that supersedes all other stories. And so it begs the question, what is the content of that story?

Christ is for you. And he is not only for you, he is inclined to do you good.

He is your substitute. In the Old Testament tradition, you lay hands on the sacrificial animal. But you don't just lay your hands on the animal, you press your hands into the sacrificial animal as a way to viscerally know the animal is for you and has become your representative. Christ and him crucified means that he desired to be the sacrificial lamb, as the way to bring us to himself. We lean into the perfect One who kept the law when we never could, and he is our perfect representative.

Our representative has brought us closer and closer to our God. We are *in* rather than *out*. Because we are in Christ we have experienced a new birth. We have a new lineage.

You are now right with God, not by law-keeping but by trusting in the law keeper himself. You are now right with God because of Jesus. You are free to pursue the righteousness of Christ in earnest. And as you do, you find that sin persists, but it has a diminished power.

As you both come out of the righteousness of Christ and pursue the righteousness of Christ, you recognize that you have been called to be in a world of trouble rather than taken out of a world of trouble. Yet in this world we have his very presence; he never leaves and never forsakes. In this world, what we find is Jesus Christ is the suffering servant, and we will follow that particular royal road.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HOW WE LIVE TODAY

As we move to a new family with a new Shepherd, it does not cause us to forget what has happened, but it tells a story that is louder and more dominant. Christ and him crucified, and everything that is contained in that, is now our representative story.

As the Son goes, so go his people. In this new house, things will not always go well. The royal road moves us through the wilderness where the royal Prince has gone before. Jesus Christ has gone through the wilderness on our behalf so that we can go through it with a certain kind of confidence, because he is with us.

You are weak and dependent; you are a child. This is a very important part of the culture of the new house and Shepherd. This means there are many things your Father does that you won't understand. Yet we don't need to understand these things because we know enough about who the Father is and how he has revealed himself in the crucified One to trust him.

This is our life's work. The easy part is capturing some of the critical features from our own past. The challenging part is now we move to a new house with a new Shepherd.

What is this new shepherd like?

Here are his words to you: *I will rescue. You are mine, and all things are yours. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father in heaven is pleased to give you everything. Everything that is his is yours.*

The apostle Paul says it differently (1 Corinthians 3:4): *Why do you bother saying “I’m of Paul” or “I’m of Apollos” when the Lord has given you everything?* All things are yours, and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

What are the challenges of the new house?

The challenges of the new house are described by the word faith; a word that can be used in two different ways.

One way is you either have your trust in Christ or you have your trust in yourself, or other things outside of Jesus. This faith is an either/or.

Another way to think about faith is more or less. You see with increasing clarity. Our task is that we would grow in this kind of faith. This is our aim, because we cannot help but see the old house and the old shepherd.

SEEING BY FAITH

Our iconic story will not be erased from our lives, but Scripture teaches us to see through the old house and the old shepherd. The writer of Hebrews even talks about *seeing by faith* in relation to creation itself (Hebrews 11:3).

By faith, the saints in Hebrews 11 saw all the difficulties of life, but they saw beyond them. They saw the new house and the new Shepherd who stands behind them. What a wonderful task this is for us also!

Because of the new Shepherd and the new house, there is a second part to our consideration of family history. Yes, we look at some of the details of our past and try to understand patterns and see how they influence us in the present. But then, we move to a new house and a new Shepherd and have that position as the vantage point for the rest of our lives.

REFLECTION

As you think about your own iconic story (the one you wrote in the Before You Begin activity, or a new story that has come to mind), how do you see God at work transforming your experience? What difference does it make for you that you have a new Shepherd and a new representative story?

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STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe your family history has been influential in developing who you are now? Why or why not?
2. When you consider the continuum of belonging versus not belonging, where does your experience from childhood fall? How do you feel about this placement?
3. Why is it helpful to use imagery and metaphor to describe your past as a child? How do imagery and metaphor help capture experience and emotions in ways that words can fail to do? (Ed frequently returned to the image and metaphor of a shepherd in his talk.)
4. Read John 14:2–3. How can reflecting on your new house give you a vision for how to face the brokenness in your past?
5. Consider the metaphor of the old house and the old shepherd. How can you move into your past, identify significant portions, and leave nothing unaffected by the reality that you now live in a new house with a new shepherd?
6. How does your past speak into your present situation? And how does being aware of that help you move forward faithfully in your current relationships?
7. What rules and traditions (both good and bad) describe your current family experience? How can you grow so that the rules and traditions in your house more closely reflect the Kingdom of God?
8. Although we know our past it is not determinative for our future or choices, it is significant. Why is this important to keep in mind? How do we avoid glossing over difficult things in our past with a triumphant mentality? How do we avoid blaming our current troubles solely on our past?
9. How can family history be helpful in pastoral care and counseling situations? What limitations might you put on its helpfulness?
10. Knowing what you know now, how would you move toward someone who is dominated by difficulties from their past?