

CHAPTER 1

THE MOST DIFFICULT MOMENT IN PARENTING

What would you say is the most difficult moment of parenting?

Parenting in a real sense is the process of letting go. When our little baby comes home from the hospital, we start with complete control of that baby's life; but we also begin letting go. First, it's letting them sit up without support. In a few months, it's letting them walk around the coffee table. It's like we have this tight, controlling grip at the beginning, and then we gradually start letting go, one finger at a time. For most parents, loosening each finger is difficult.

Sending a child to kindergarten is a difficult moment. You're controlling with only nine fingers now, or maybe eight. Years later, another big challenge is allowing your child to drive alone for the first time at age sixteen or seventeen. By then your grip is down to three or four fingers, if that.

But when you completely open that last finger, finally releasing your child entirely to his own decisions, his own common sense, his

own wisdom—that’s the toughest. It’s what I call the MDM, the Most Difficult Moment:

*For most parents, the most difficult moment
is when you come face-to-face with the reality
that you’ve given up all control.*

That moment may come while driving away from the dorm parking lot of a son or daughter’s college. Or the moment of lingering as the military bus disappears into the distance. Or driving home after a daughter’s wedding. Or the last trip carrying a son’s possessions from his room to his car on the day he moves out.

We usually know it’s coming. Our teenage child plans for college, applies, anticipates, and packs. But planning and preparation don’t help when that actual moment comes; they don’t take away the monstrous lump in our throat that nearly chokes us as we realize the one we worked hard to raise is now on his own. Dad thinks, “What will he do? Will he make wise choices? Who will he pick for friends?” Mom worries, “Will he know where to get help if he gets sick?” They both wonder, “Will he party? Will he do drugs?” Christian parents worry, “Will he follow God? Will he choose Christian friends? Will he go to church?”

My good friend and coworker Dave Pearson has had a passion for ministry to children and youth his whole life. While he ministers effectively as a leader and speaker, his first concern is for his own children. He relates his own MDM as he experienced it on a plane ride from Phoenix to Chicago, after getting his eighteen-year-old daughter settled in for her first year of college in Arizona, two thousand miles from home.

As I got on the plane, it felt like I was losing my little girl. Would she ever come home? Will she be able to make it on her own? Will she follow the Lord in what she does? Will I ever see her again? Now, I knew in my head God had made some promises, but I wasn't feeling them in my heart. Is God as faithful as He says He is? Would He make good on His promises? Would His protection be enough without my help? I was forced to put my money where my mouth has been most of my life. I'd never before had my faith stretched like this; this was *my little girl* we were talking about! It was the most difficult plane trip of my life.

My own MDM also had to do with leaving a child at college. Ryan, our youngest, wanted to attend college in Southern California where he grew up, though we'd moved to Illinois. For financial reasons, he decided to attend a junior college near Simi Valley, where he'd graduated from high school.

With a junior college, there's no orientation, no welcome, and no dorms. You just register and attend. Unlike local residents going to school there, Ryan had to find a room to rent for the year.

I flew to Los Angeles and spent the morning with him as he registered, then we got out the want ads and began looking for a place for him to live. After driving past several hole-in-the-wall places, we found a room in a house that was clean and in a good neighborhood. The owner and his son lived there too, so it felt like an okay environment for Ryan. The medieval decor bothered me some; what kind of person would put knight's armor in the entry to their living room?

But it was the best we found, so we signed the rental contract and moved him in.

As I was leaving Ryan in a pretty strange house, I could tell he was nervous about being completely on his own. He would now be completely determining his own schedule, his own friends, his own life patterns, his own values. I knew he could take care of himself, but I couldn't stop the nagging sense that I was abandoning him. I knew God was still in control, but I wrestled with the reality that I wasn't.

As I got in the car and drove to the airport that night, I couldn't stop the tears for most of the way. In some ways, it was like dealing with a death; there was the grief over *my* loss: I no longer had Ryan home. There was also the finality of it. My role as a parent was permanently changed. I knew I was only an influencer now—no longer in control—and my influence would be only from a distance. There was also the uncertainty of the future. What kind of decisions would Ryan make? Would he stay safe? Would he follow God? Like my friend Dave in his MDM, I struggled with practicing my faith. It was difficult giving up control (not that I had a lot, but you know what I mean).

Ryan survived that semester, and so did I. Today he's a fantastic young man, with whom I'm greatly pleased—and I know God is too.

THE FATHER OF JOSEPH

Two contrasting Bible stories graphically illustrate this MDM of parenting. Both stories are about sons leaving home, out from under their parents' control; and they focus on two dads who must have deeply grieved on their day of losing control.

First, there's the Old Testament Jacob. Undoubtedly his MDM as a parent comes as he hears evidence from his other sons that their brother Joseph had been killed. (It would be many long years of separation before Jacob found out otherwise.) Understandably, Jacob was deeply grieved:

Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him. (Gen. 37:34–35)

A large number of parents will identify a tragic event like the death of a child as their MDM. That was the case with our dear friends Bob and Lee Baldwin, with whom we worked closely in ministry years ago.

At their church in Southern California, Bob served on Sunday mornings as the sound technician, and part of his duties was to close and lock up the church. One Easter Sunday, Bob stayed behind after the service to help lock up while Lee and their three boys went on ahead to her father's house for an Easter meal with a large number of their extended family.

Bob arrived late, just as after-dinner preparations were underway for a big Easter egg hunt, a highlight of the afternoon. The adults went to the front yard to hide eggs after leaving the numerous kids inside the house. Meanwhile Bob fixed himself a plate of food and headed out back along with a friend. The two men sat on the patio near a swimming pool.

What no one noticed was that Bob and Lee's three-year-old, Chad, had stayed in the backyard and was playing with a toy car by the edge of the pool. Bob and his friend never saw him. The car fell into the pool; trying to retrieve it, little Chad went into the water as well. He slipped beneath the pool cover and couldn't find his way out.

After about ten minutes, the adults came in from the front yard, realized Chad was missing, and started the frantic search. By the time they finally found him, it was too late. Bob and Lee lost their precious little boy in a horrible accident.

I'm sure you can imagine Bob's feelings that day as he realized his son had died so near to where he was sitting. Bob had to live with the grieving, but also with the "if onlys" that haunted him: "If only I'd looked over at the pool"; "If only I'd counted the kids"; "If only I'd been faster about locking up the church and getting here."

Some parents have other experiences that are deeply tragic. It might be the moment of learning about a case of abuse, or about cancer, or about some other devastation.

Fortunately, not all parents must go through such tragic moments. But even though their MDMs lack the terrible permanence of something like the death of a child, their experiences still involve emotional intensity, separation, and grief. And they all share this aspect in common: loss of control.

THE FATHER OF THE PRODIGAL

In the New Testament, I think the father in the story of the prodigal son would also have picked his younger son's parting as his MDM of parenting. The father isn't named (characteristic of Jesus' parables)

and may not even be real; but in his actions toward his wayward son, he certainly represents our heavenly Father's love, forgiveness, and grace toward us. That was Jesus' point.

But I want you to see another perspective. Look again at the first few lines of the parable:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country. (Luke 15:11–13)

Can you imagine what the father was feeling as he watched this son—who had made such an unwise request—ride off with more money than he was responsible enough to handle? *What's this immature kid thinking? What's going to happen to him?* Imagine the knot in his stomach and the lump in his throat as his son shrank into a tiny dot on the horizon.

No doubt the father of the Prodigal had lots of uncertainty as he watched his son leave. We, too, often experience such uncertainty as we wonder how our kids will respond to independence.

JOSEPH OR THE PRODIGAL?

When parents begin to see signs that their children are struggling spiritually, they often direct their angst toward the church: "Help us raise our kids!" they beg. Many times the children's and youth ministries at our churches do help; too often, the help isn't enough.

That's where the story of Joseph and the contrasting parable of the prodigal son become so applicable today. No parent ever wants their son or daughter to respond to independence like the Prodigal. But in reality, our MDMs are often made more difficult because we fear our child will make bad choices like he did.

Likewise, no congregation desires their youth to walk away from church once they leave for college. Yet few churches really have a thorough understanding of what happens to those children who grew up in their ministries.

Every Christian parent, I believe, wants their son or daughter to be like Joseph, and every church shares that desire with them. Our MDMs become far less traumatic if we can have confidence that our children will make wise decisions and choices when they're away from our control.

Regretfully, far too many Christian young people who leave home act like the Prodigal; too few live like Joseph. In this book, you'll discover the critical need for a new course, examine Joseph as a model for churches and parents to target, and learn of a path that will better produce the young adults we want to see.

My prayer is that God will open your eyes to new approaches to guiding children spiritually as you read this book.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. At this point in your parenting experience, can you think of a difficult moment when you've had to let go of control?
2. What do you think of the proposal that, generally speaking, the Most Difficult Moment is when you release control entirely?

3. Do you remember when you stepped completely out from under your parents' control? What do you think this was like for them?

4. Why is it helpful for you as a parent to think ahead to the MDM and consider what it might be like?

5. What do you think it would have been like to be the father of the Prodigal? Do you know of any parallel situations today?

6. What would it have been like to be Jacob and hear of his son's death? How would you have expected it to affect him? Do you know of any evidence in the story later on to indicate that he *was* still affected?

