



HOMeward BOUND

*Building an attractive,
Christ-centered family
on
eternal principles*

EDWARD A. HARTMAN

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS





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INTRODUCTION



In August of 1993, I kissed my wife and children goodbye, drove to the airport and departed for a month of studies toward a Doctor of Ministry degree at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. My interest as a pastor lay first in the effective proclamation of God's inspired, inerrant, infallible Word, and I eagerly looked forward to being sharpened toward that end as I learned from some truly gifted preachers and theologians.

My secondary interest lay in the establishment and maintenance of a godly home, for over my years of ministry I had discovered that few things more attractively display and persuasively commend the glory of God in the life of a Christian than a Christ-centered marriage and the Christ-centered family relationships that grow out of that marriage. God designed the family, in part, to serve as a multi-faceted illustration of the relationship between himself and his people – one that would cause the watching world to sit up and take notice.

How disturbing, then, that the glory of God is so dimly reflected in so many of the families that claim the name of Christ. J. I. Packer has written that we live in 'an era when marriage, even among Christians is becoming brittle and unstable, and serial marriage through a series of divorces is modeled under limelight, so to speak, by top stars in the entertainment world, and casual sexual relations between adults raise no eyebrows, and teenage fornication is shrugged off as a universal and inevitable fact of life, and most children in most homes grow up in pagan ignorance

of God and his law.’ Packer’s immediate answer to this dilemma is, ‘there is much to be learned by tracking Puritan thought on marriage and the family.’¹

So, taking Packer’s lead, I set out on a study of what the Puritans had to say about the establishment of a godly marriage and home. I quickly discovered that most of their writing was primarily proactive in nature, in glaring contrast to the reactive or corrective nature of most of today’s writing on marriage and the family. I also discovered that rather than simply emphasizing the right behavior necessary in a godly marriage and home, much of their writing went directly to the condition of the heart that prompted and constrained that behavior.

Then in August of 1995, I returned to Westminster for more concentrated study, this time having the privilege of studying the theology of Jonathan Edwards with Dr. John Gerstner. That week marked, in an ominous way, the introduction to the watershed year of my life. On the Saturday of that week, I was studying a number of out-of-print Puritan works on microfilm, when I stumbled across an unusually titled treatise by William Perkins, published in 1616, at the University of Cambridge, *A Salve for a Sicke Man, or A Treatise Containing the Nature, Differences, and Kindes of Death; as also The Right Manner of Dying Well*. The promotional also read, ‘it may serve for spiritual instruction to (1) Mariners when they goe to Sea; (2) Soldiers when they goe to Battell; (3) Women when they travell (travail) with childe.’ The remainder of the work was specifically titled at the heading of each page, *The Right Way of Dying Well*.

I was so intrigued by this title that I printed all the pages of barely legible text from the microfilm viewer, to be carefully read later. As I put those pages into a folder, I glanced at my watch and noticed that my family was in all likelihood eating breakfast, so I picked up the telephone and dialed our home number. The voice that answered was unexpected, though not unfamiliar. It was one of the girls from our church’s high school youth group, who with an uncertain voice informed me that the headaches my wife had been battling for the past several weeks had grown much worse, to the point of her having to be sedated because of the

¹ Packer, J. I., *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 270.

now unmanageable pain. The children had been sent to stay with friends, and my wife's mother was on her way to our home to help in any way she could. I was advised that the doctor felt I needed to take the next flight home. He had used the words 'possible brain tumor'.

It was to the pages of William Perkins' treatise, *The Right Way of Dying Well*, that my attention was drawn when, less than two hours later, I sat on an aeroplane flying back to our home in Mississippi. I wrestled deeply on that long flight from San Diego to Dallas, and then on to Jackson. 'This can't be!' were the words that kept running through my mind. My family is supposed to be immune to this kind of crisis. Cancer happens to other families, but certainly not ours! But the title of Perkins' work rang in my ears, and its content played like a film in the theater of my mind.

I was bombarded with reminders of what had become one of my driving convictions: few things more attractively display and persuasively commend the glory of God in the life of a Christian than a Christ-centered marriage and a Christ-centered family ... *one that would cause the watching world to sit up and take notice*. I now desperately wanted to reject the truth that had begun whispering in my mind: sometimes the glory of God is displayed most attractively and commended most persuasively through the *death* of one in a Christ-centered marriage or family.

The watershed year of my life had begun.

A few days later, I was sitting alone on the edge of the bed in an empty hospital room on the fourth floor of the University of Mississippi Medical Center. A neurosurgeon walked in wearing a rumpled set of surgical scrubs, fatigue unmistakably evident in his face. Just a few hours earlier, my wife had been wheeled down to the surgical suites to undergo a biopsy on a fist-sized brain tumor. The neurosurgeon took a seat opposite the bed, sighed deeply, and looked at me as if waiting for me to ask the question. 'How'd it go?' I asked. He took a long, deep breath and said, 'Not as well as we had hoped. The tumor is far more virulent than we had expected and is definitely inoperable.' He paused, and again, just stared, his agony in telling me these things unmistakable. I quietly asked the only question that seemed to follow from his response: 'Is she terminal?' Another long, deep breath – then he quietly said, 'I'm sorry.' My mind began reeling, as all the questions I desperately wanted to

ask screamed in my mind. Yet all I could manage was the question he had already answered, ‘Are you telling me I’m about to lose my wife?’ Again he softly replied, ‘I am so sorry. We will do all we can for her.’ And with few more words, he stood, put his hand on my shoulder, and left the room. Again, the reminder, *sometimes the glory of God is displayed most attractively and commended most persuasively through the death of one in a Christ-centered marriage or family.*

In God’s providence, it was William Perkins, whom J. I. Packer calls ‘the C. S. Lewis of the Puritans’, who helped me see most clearly that Christ-centeredness in a godly family grows out of living constantly *with a long view.* A perspective that holds in constant view the unshakable reality of eternity as the backdrop to every issue, every relationship, every hope, every dream, every joy, every sorrow, every smile, and every tear. I’ve learned that as the spiritual head of my marriage and family, I can offer no greater gift to those I hold dear in this life, than to point them constantly to eternity, and to the One who sovereignly rules over it.

In Romans 12:1-2, the apostle Paul challenges us: ‘Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. *Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*’ It is this ‘godly preoccupation’ with eternity that lies at the heart of offering our bodies as living sacrifices, and consequently, at the heart of a life of worship. The result of this preoccupation with eternity, Paul tells us, is that we will be able test and approve what God’s good, perfect, and pleasing will is. This doesn’t simply point to the right *identifying of* or *thinking about* God’s will, but it leads us to the right *valuing* of those things that count for eternity. And when we learn to treasure above all else the perfect and pleasing will of God and learn to be satisfied in all that God is for us and offers to us, then everything else in our lives, *and in our families,* regains proper perspective and proportion.

I recognize that for many, the connection between the subjects of ‘the godly home’ and ‘preparing to die well’ is not immediately obvious. But I’ve come to see that the two are inextricably linked. Several months before Amy died, she stopped by the local florist’s

shop on her way to visit a friend. While she was there, she noticed several large arrangements that had been prepared for a funeral scheduled for later that day. Though the flowers were beautiful, she frowned at the various cards attached to each arrangement. They read, 'With deepest sympathy,' or 'With our condolences.' She slowly shook her head and said to the florist, 'Those cards are far too depressing. I don't want any like those on the flowers at my funeral.' She began thumbing through the cards that were on display, and smiled as she pulled one out and laid it on the counter. 'This is the card I want on my flowers,' she said as she turned and left the shop. Three months later, at her memorial service, all the flowers at the graveside and church included the card she had selected, 'Welcome to your new home.'

I've carried one of those cards with me for quite some time. It serves as a reminder that no matter how comfortable or content I am, this world, and all that it offers, is not my permanent home. But neither is it merely a *temporary* home, with no understanding or expectation of a future one. In the clearest sense, this life is *transitional*, meaning that it is where I now joyfully and gratefully reside, yet with an ever-present expectation of being prepared for that final day when I am welcomed to my new home in heaven. The transitional character of this life is what reminds us to hold in tension the reality of where we are now, and where we will one day be. The apostle John puts it this way: 'How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are (the reality and privilege of where we are now)! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (the expectation of where we will one day be). Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure (the challenge to live in the tension between the two realities)' (1 John 3:1-3).

We live in a consumer culture that exalts and commends living with a passion for the moment. The advertising that relentlessly bombards us depends on that fact. The prospect of future gain is easily set aside in exchange for the personal gratification that is rarely delayed. Consumer debt in our country is at an all-time high, largely because we've bought into the subtle lie that no day

of final accounting will arrive, assuming that it can be postponed indefinitely through further indebtedness. Is it any wonder that in this environment the raising of godly families has become increasingly challenging? Our children are not living with an eternal perspective because they have not seen eternity in their own parent's eyes. Nor, more practically, have they seen eternity consistently displayed in their own parents' spending patterns.

Moses reminds us in Psalm 90 that each of our lives in this transitional home has an end point – one that calls us to apply the wisdom gained from that perspective to every area of our lives: 'The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.... Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom' (vv. 10, 12). A final day of accounting is coming, it cannot be postponed, and 'nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight.... the eyes of him to whom we must give account' (Heb. 4:13).

What's the point of all this? Simply this: *few things, like death, will put life in perspective.* And few things, like accountability, will put obedience in perspective. This life is transitional; it can prepare us to be welcomed into our new, eternal home. And it provides us with a lifetime of opportunities to invite others along, beginning with our own families. In the process, it will call us to a constant preoccupation with eternity, and the One who fills it and qualifies us for it.

In the following chapters, I'd like to show you a picture of a godly home, based on the practice of our Puritan predecessors in the faith. I wish I could simply show you a picture of my own family and home as an example. But the reminder of our many shortcomings, and outright failures, makes us more of a distortion of that picture than a model. Yet we're learning, and are growing toward that end. What lies at the center of this maturing process is an ever-growing understanding that our lives, individually and collectively as a family, must be centered around Christ. Not just around his finished work on the cross, but also around his ongoing work in our lives through his Holy Spirit as he prepares to welcome us to our new home in heaven. This is the perspective that I believe most powerfully impacts upon building and enjoying a godly home, all as a way of attractively displaying



INTRODUCTION

and persuasively commending the glory of God in the life of a Christian family.

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known (1 Cor. 13:12).

