TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT HARD THINGS

HONEST CONVERSATIONS WHEN LIFE GETS COMPLICATED



Rebekah Hannah and Michael Keller

FOREWORD BY KATHY KELLER

"Don't let the words 'kids' and 'conversations' fool you. This is not only a parenting book. In this concise and remarkably practical guide, Michael Keller and Rebekah Hannah provide a simple, honest, and effective approach to discussing difficult topics without losing the people you're trying to reach. In the end, this isn't just a book about talking with children—it's a book every adult should read to learn how to navigate hard conversations with wisdom and care."

Jonathan D. Holmes, Executive Director, CCEF; author of *Grounded in Grace*

"As a counselor and a parent, I'm overjoyed to see a book like this. Time and time again, I have helped parents establish, maintain, and repair good communication, because it is the skill that will carry their family through many hard seasons. But what really excites me is that this book lays the essential foundation of the gospel. It reminds us as parents to trust the Lord, listen well, go deep, and prioritize the Lord's ways over our own. These are tough but necessary words. I highly recommend this book to parents and counselors!"

Kristin L. Kellen, EdD, PhD, Director of EdD Studies and Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

"There is an important idea embedded in each page of this book for wisely loving your child or someone else's. And for those kids who leave you feeling like you can never say the right thing? Thanks to this great book, you have ways to love them that, I think, will leave them surprised and perhaps wanting more."

Edward T. Welch, CCEF Faculty, bestselling author

"I inhaled this book in a single sitting and exhaled with relief when I finished. As a parent, I'm often just as afraid of not knowing the answer to my children's hard questions as I am of knowing the right answer and handling it poorly. Beneath both fears lies a deeper one: that their spiritual future hinges on my response.

Rather than offering a formula that feeds that fear, Michael and Rebekah relieve it, providing a gracious, gospel-centered framework that helps parents listen well, respond wisely, and trust God with what only he can do. This book won't give you all the answers, but it will hold out the grace you need to become the kind of parent who can sit with hard questions, rest confidently in Christ when you don't know the answer, and entrust your children to Jesus. It's a book I'll return to again and again as my children's questions grow and change alongside them."

Abbey Wedgeworth, Author of *Help! I'm Ruining My Kids*

"Rebekah Hannah and Michael Keller are not 'parenting experts' with bullet-proof theories or seven steps for perfectly navigating hard things. What they offer is refreshing honesty, gospel clarity, and relational wisdom from many years of raising kids in NYC, where their response to difficult issues is pressure-tested every day. This book is not a collection of quick answers, but the wise insights of two faithful friends walking alongside you as you navigate parenting in a broken and complex world."

Brian Walker, Director of Operations, Anchored Virtual

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Rebekah Hannah and Michael Keller

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To Lucy, Maggie, Kate, Charlotte, and Ellis

You are our greatest teachers.
Thank you for your brave questions, your honest hearts, and the boatloads of grace you extend when we fall short, all the time. You taught us the book.

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Foreword

AS THE AUTHORS tell you at the get-go, this is not a parenting book. It does not tell you how to deal with disciplinary issues, or what age (if ever!) screens ought to be allowed, or five techniques to increase your child's intelligence.

The title should be a clue. This book is to help you stay on speaking terms (not shouting terms) with your child. How to talk about things that may make you (or him or her) uncomfortable but still have to be discussed. Especially, how to begin, maintain, and grow a relationship that is honest, safe, mutually satisfying, and long-lasting.

None of this is easy, as in three-steps-to-talking-to-your-kid easy. It might even be as hard, or harder, than maintaining good communication in your marriage. (Pro tip: The skills you learn here can/may/should be used in any meaningful relationship.) The truth is, in a world promising quick, easy hacks for pesky problems, talking to your offspring about difficult or even inflammatory subjects takes prayer, effort, humility, love, and a servant's heart.

I should tell you something. Our three sons have long insisted that Tim and I should never give anyone parenting

advice. And they may have a point. Despite coauthoring a book on marriage, Tim and I never wrote one on parenting—because we never felt we had been especially good at it. We watched friends who seemed far more intentional, far more consistent, and far more creative than we were. Yet their children's outcomes were no more predictable than ours. Parenting, if it is anything at all, is a humbling endeavor. I once told a friend that it is better to be high on grace than on techniques when it comes to raising your kids. I still believe that. Grace does not mean giving up. It does mean giving up on the idea that the right formula will produce the right result.

When Tim was teaching at Westminster Seminary, he was also given oversight of the doctor of ministry program. This degree requires candidates to do a project. In the case of one memorable student, he wanted to discover which conditions and practices were most significant in helping children maintain their faith into adulthood. He studied factors such as family devotions, Sunday school attendance, Christian summer camp attendance, youth group attendance, and Christian schooling.

In the end, he was surprised to discover that, based on his research, there was only *one* statistically significant factor that correlated with adult children making the Christian faith of their childhood homes their own. The young adults who checked yes in answer to the statement "I always felt like I could talk to my parents about anything" were the most likely to still be following Jesus. The one thing that mattered most was whether a child felt safe enough to bring anything to a parent without fear—doubts, failures, questions, even sins.

So, yes, a lot hangs on you being able to be the parent that your child can talk to about anything. That is what this book will help you become—not a perfect parent but an approachable one. So read on and learn.

And oh, yes . . . be prepared to repent and apologize to your child (or spouse, or friend) when it does not go well. Because you won't always do it right, and even if you do, your child might not receive it well. But your repentance may even be more valuable than your mastery of the wisdom you are about to read. After all, what better way to teach your children about grace than to need it yourself right in front of them?

Kathy Keller
Redeemer Presbyterian Church

Introduction

Rebekah Hannah

YEARS AGO, ON a crisp fall morning, I was walking my seven-year-old to her new school. Having recently moved to New York City, I asked her what good things she had discovered since moving back. As she described her favorite ice cream and her go-to playground, she paused and said, "I just don't want to get kidnapped like everyone else."

I was baffled until I saw that her little fingers were pointing at the building we were walking by. The wall was littered with hundreds of "KIDNAPPED" flyers of beautiful souls who were taken as hostages in an overseas conflict. From babies to grandparents to college students, the community within our neighborhood was begging for someone to bring them home.

I clearly wasn't paying close attention to my surroundings as I realized thousands of these signs had popped up all over our neighborhood in the last several days. Understanding my daughter's alarm quickly moved me from confusion to total awareness. Of course she was scared—she could read now! In the following weeks, the signs had new words attached to them: "FOUND," "DEAD," "HOME." Hundreds more were left without any news at all.

How do I begin to explain a complex, multigenerational, global conflict taking place halfway around the world to anyone, much less a seven-year-old? Especially when I don't fully understand the story myself? This is when I first began to think about how to talk to kids (my kids!) about unusually hard things.

Our friends, Michael and Sara Keller, live across the street from us on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Together, our families make up a sorority of girls ranging from elementary to high school. All five of these little women have wildly different personalities, are gifted in particular ways, and are regularly forced to have family dinners all together. When your parents are best friends, kids often just don't have a choice.

One thing we've all learned as parents is that when you mix ages, experiences, and the streets of New York City—talking about hard things isn't optional. The seven-year-old hears and sees the same things on the street as the sixteen-year-old.

In our urban Christian community, talking about hard things has always been seen as a good approach when raising kids in the city. Michael's father, Timothy Keller, often spoke of the benefit of being forced to have hard conversations while kids are still in the home. Conversations involving complicated concepts—moral, spiritual, political, or relational—are far better navigated while our kids are still home with us.

Life forces difficult discussions upon us, planned or not. In urban neighborhoods, this might look like people in the depths of addiction lying on the street as we pass, someone spewing anger over a parking spot while we eat dinner al fresco, or sexually explicit ads scattered throughout the transit system on our children's way to school. Kids are confronted with pieces of life that we might wish they could encounter later.

But regardless of where we live, our children will see and hear things that we might wish they didn't. With the rise of the internet, especially social media, kids of all ages, in all places, are exposed to all kinds of things. From sexuality questions to political conversations to the reality of evil surrounding us, kids everywhere are forced to know more about the world we live in than ever before. Whether in the city, suburbs, or country, we all must make decisions about hard conversations with kids. This is our reality whether we live in urban LA (Los Angeles) or rural LA (Lower Alabama).

Michael and I wrote this book out of our own need for a truly rich, biblical paradigm to guide us in these important conversations with our children. We need not hide our kids from the reality of our world, but we can enter these conversations with God's wisdom and grace. God cares more about our children than we do, and while he gives us a biblical foundation and an instinct to love them well, it still takes work.

Our hope is to encourage you also to talk to your kids about the hard things of this world. Each child you have is different, so your approach will naturally vary. How you talk with a four-year-old will look different from how you talk with a fourteen-year-old; their struggles and instincts will differ. Yet the theological reality for why we talk to kids about hard things doesn't shift. Whatever the age or stage of your children, we hope (and pray) this book points you to the gospel principles that will ground any conversation with any child. Fair warning: We all eventually find that hard conversations in parenting are just as much for our own growth as they are for our kids.

Before you get to the first chapter, it may help to know who is speaking to you.

Michael Keller has been part of Redeemer NYC's life and ministry since its inception in 1989. He was eight years old

when his father, Tim, had the wild idea to plant a Presbyterian church in Manhattan. Years later Michael also became a pastor, and in 2017 he planted Redeemer Lincoln Square. Michael traces arguments carefully, builds theological frameworks, and thinks deeply about how historic Christian truths speak into modern confusion.

My story looks different.

I grew up in North Texas. My dad was a small-town pastor, which meant church splits were not theoretical and Wednesday night business meetings were a normal part of childhood. Ministry was personal and lived in our living room. I watched my parents absorb criticism quietly and keep loving hard people anyway. The church was messy and close to home.

Despite it all, I still went into ministry. I went to seminary, got married, and had children in Kentucky, Manhattan, and Florida, which means our family has lived in very different cultural contexts. In each place, I found myself asking the same question: How does my theology play out in real life? Ivy League spaces. Southern churches. City apartments. Renovation projects. Counseling rooms. Full-time mom seasons. Painful ministry seasons. In the carpool line. At bedtime. In the middle of sibling conflict. In the questions that don't have easy answers. This is where I find my actual theology is authenticated.

While Michael and I both come from pastors' homes, our childhood experiences are quite different. His father is one of the most well-known pastors of our time. Michael grew up watching faith engage global conversations, cultural scrutiny, and public criticism. I grew up picking up hitchhikers off the highway, welcoming newly released prisoners into our home, and going to small church revivals. But before our fathers were pastors to the world, they were our dads at the dinner table.

Even though I was in small-town churches and Michael grew up on the streets of Manhattan, our similarities are still striking. We both saw firsthand that faith cannot survive on image alone. We both watched what happens when theology either holds under pressure or fractures beneath it. We both learned early that what is said publicly must survive privately, whether it's in *The New York Times* or just a simple pulpit in a nowhere town.

That shared history is not lost on either of us in writing this book.

Decades ago, during a college internship in New York City, I regularly attended "Faith, Art, and Work" conversations, trying to understand how theology intersects with creativity and vocation. It was Michael's dad who was helping to build spaces where those conversations could happen. We didn't know each other then, but God was quietly weaving threads that would eventually cross.

We both enjoy ideas. We both love conversations. We both believe Christianity is not fragile. We both believe the gospel speaks to art, culture, doubt, suffering, and any part of life—especially parenting. And now, we are both raising daughters in the same city. We both sit at dinnertime listening to real questions. We both wrestle with whether what we know about God actually holds up in the lives of the five girls we love deeply.

We work together. But you will probably notice as you read that we communicate differently. One chapter may feel more like apologetics and have a bigger picture. Another may feel more narrative and applied. We hope that our different perspectives give you a fuller picture of how to have these difficult conversations. Because hard conversations require both depth and tenderness. They require biblical doctrine that can

withstand scrutiny and wisdom that can survive a Tuesday afternoon in the drive-through.

Our prayer is that this book will be used by God to ground you in the gospel of God's love, and that the Spirit will fill you with encouragement and confidence as you interact and talk with your kids. We don't have to talk because we are afraid for our kids, but we get to talk because we have been given sound judgment and a strong mind through his Spirit and his Word. Second Timothy 1:7 and 13–14 anchors us here: "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. . . . What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us."

This book is not written from a place of mastery. It is written from the middle of life. From two friends shaped by very different stories, united by the same hope as brother and sister in Christ, still learning how God bends low enough to meet us in our everyday lives.

This is your invitation into that work with us.

Chapter 1
The Heart of Jesus for Your Family

Michael Keller

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1–3)

I'M WORRIED. With the subtitle *Honest Conversations When Life Gets Complicated*, it sounds like this is a how-to book on parenting. But I promised never to write a book on parenting. My parents, who raised three sons, served in ministry for decades, and together wrote many books, also said they would never write a book on parenting. Why? Mainly because most Christian parenting books swing between two equally unhelpful poles: the therapeutic, affirmation-driven "it's not your fault" approach, and the pragmatic, technique-driven approach that works like an equation: Input A (biblical principle) + Input B (correct technique) = Output C (a well-adjusted, believing child). If you follow these seven steps, implement

these five habits, and master these three crucial conversations, you too can raise the child you always wanted.

These books feed on our anxiety. You know what it feels like when your toddler has a meltdown in the grocery store, or when your teenager rolls their eyes, slams the door, and disappears into a digital world you barely understand and certainly cannot control. It's there at 3:00 a.m. when you replay the day's failures and wonder whether you've done irreparable damage to the child you love deeply. So we look for help in books that might show us the way. Before we go any further, you should know—this is not that kind of book.

So what is this book about? What do we do when our children come to us asking hard questions? I'm not talking about "Why is the sky blue?" kinds of questions. I'm talking about the really hard ones. I got a text message from my teenage daughter a week ago: *Prove God IS REAL????* (She said later she was texting for a friend, but that doesn't mean she wasn't asking the question as well.) How do you answer that text? What do you do when your child asks, "Why did God let my best friend's dad get cancer? What happens when we die? Why do we need to believe in Jesus—my friend doesn't believe in God, and she's nicer than most Christians I know."

These are the questions that come up right before bed, without warning or syllabus, and when they land, most of us do not feel prepared. If your child isn't old enough or hasn't asked you a hard question yet, it's going to happen—probably sooner rather than later. For those of you who have had this experience, you know this is a scary parenting moment. Why? Somewhere beneath the surface, we carry this belief: What I say in the next thirty seconds might be the word that steadies or shatters my child's faith forever. That fear, and what to do in those fearful moments, is what this book seeks to address.

This chapter starts from the beginning—exploring the source of our parenting fears and how the gospel addresses them.

The Formulas We Reach For

The simplistic parenting formulas we often find in parenting books hide huge assumptions. They assume that *you* are the ultimate variable in your child's spiritual equation. It is up to you to pray enough, discipline enough, model enough, and respond wisely enough, and if you do that, things will go well for your child. It puts the outcome of your child's life squarely in your hands, but that's a burden no parent can carry. And yet we try.

When a difficult question comes up and we feel that our response will determine our child's spiritual future, we either grip the conversation so tightly that it cannot breathe or ignore it completely because we feel that the stakes are too high to engage. This happens when we think it is all up to us. If the right parenting inputs guarantee the right output, then a hard conversation is a high-stakes gamble. Handle the question about suffering poorly, and maybe that's it. Say the wrong thing about faith, and our child may never come to faith.

But the truth (that we hesitate to say or even acknowledge) is that you can do everything right as a parent, and your child will still encounter pain. You can read every book, pray every prayer, and create the best environment, and your child might still walk away from everything you taught them. Just look at the Bible. Samuel was faithful, but his sons didn't follow him. David was called a man after God's own heart, but two of his sons, Absalom and Adonijah, tried to take the throne. Even God, the perfect parent, had children in Eden who turned away from him. Do we really think we can create a better environment than God did?

Conversely, we all know people who came from broken, inconsistent homes and from parents who, by all standard metrics, parented badly, yet they nevertheless became people of remarkable faith. If good parenting techniques were the decisive variable, this would not be possible. The correlation between our performance and our children's outcomes is far more complex, far more humbling, and far more hopeful than our formulas allow.

If these formulas were true, if right inputs guaranteed right outputs, then salvation would depend on human works. *Your* work. The destiny of your child's soul would rest on whether you performed your parental duties well enough to merit God's blessing. This is not Christianity. This is karma with a cross-shaped pendant. It is a "covenant of works" that crushes the parent who is never good enough and reduces the child to a project rather than a person. Our theology might say, "God is ultimately in charge of my child," but deep down our functional belief is that making sure our children are happy and holy is all up to us.

The gospel announces something far more radical: Salvation has always been, and always will be, by grace, from start to finish. Even for your children.

Our children's hearts are not shaped first and foremost by our parenting skills but by God's kindness. In the end, a child's faith is not the result of a parent's work. This does not negate the importance of parenting. It matters deeply, just not for the reasons we often believe. Parents play a critical role in a child's story, pointing the child to the real Author, but the parent is never the savior; they're the signpost.

Knowing this truth changes *what* you're doing and *why* you do it as a parent.

The Weight You Were Never Meant to Carry

Across the street from St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in New York City, at the entrance to Rockefeller Center, stands a 45-foot-tall, 14,000-pound Art Deco depiction of Atlas. Hailing from ancient Greek mythology, Atlas is a Titan who was condemned to hold the world on his shoulders for all eternity. Installed in 1937 during the Great Depression, the sculpture took on additional meaning, symbolizing the burden of responsibility humans carry as they labor. He is straining. He is strong. He is also the perfect picture of how many of us view parenting.

Like Atlas, we feel the weight of our children's futures on our shoulders because of the lie: *It is all up to you.* We carry the burden of every academic choice, every question of screen time, every relocation decision. Should we stay put or move for better schools? Have we said the right things about God, sex, and politics? The surrounding culture is always teaching, whether you live in a city, a suburb, or a rural area. It is on your child's smartphone or their friend's smartphone. Social media platforms influence their thinking before you can get there. Messages such as "be yourself," "follow your heart," "you do you," and "create your own identity" start at *Sesame Street* and land on your cultural platform of choice.

So when our children come to us with hard questions, we tend to either answer them with a scripted theological answer we memorized from our own background or just avoid the question entirely. Either way, the child gets the message: Hard questions are handled with a predetermined script, or they are not handled at all. The next time they have a real question about death, doubt, faith, or belief, they now know who not to ask.

What can free us from this? What would allow a parent to sit with a hard question without buckling, preaching, or backing away? What would free a parent to say, "I don't know the full answer, but I will think about it and get back to you" without feeling exposed or ashamed? The answer is not a better technique. The answer is found in knowing a Person who sustains our lives and gives us a different way to live. The book of Hebrews shows us both.

The One Who Holds Everything

The author of Hebrews opens his letter not with instructions on how to do life but with a vision. Jesus is the "heir of all things" and the one "through whom" all things are made and sustained. He is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:1–3). These phrases are powerful in their own right, but the author goes on to say that Jesus is not merely *like* God or *appointed* by God. Jesus *is* God, made visible to us, and he sustains *all* things.

That phrase should change your life.

In the original Greek, the word *sustains*, or *upholds* (*pherōn*), is not a passive word, like a pedestal upholding a vase of plastic flowers. It's active and directional. Jesus is not a clockmaker who wound up the universe and stepped back to observe. He is more like a captain, steering a vessel through a storm. The word "sustains" implies *carrying something along* toward a destination, sustaining and guiding it moment by moment.

And what is Jesus carrying along? Hebrews 1:3 says *all things*.

Not *some* things. Not just spiritual things. Not just the parts of the universe we consider important. Let me put this in perspective. If the distance between the earth and the sun, more than 96 million miles, were the thickness of a single sheet

of paper, then the distance from the earth to the next nearest star would be a stack of papers seventy feet high. The diameter of our galaxy would be a stack of paper over three hundred miles high, and that's just one small part of the entire universe. Jesus is sustaining all of that. Every atom in every galaxy. Every breath your child takes—at every moment they take it. The author of Hebrews tells us that the physical structure of the universe, the very movement of human history, and the details of every human life are actively sustained by Jesus Christ at every moment. Every detail. Every breath. By his word. He speaks, and creation holds together by the power of his word.

If Jesus is upholding all of that, how could he not also uphold you and the children you love and treasure? Our anxiety, which is often dressed up in the language of love and concern, can actually be a deeply concealed form of pride. It assumes that we, not God, are the ones holding our children's lives together. It assumes that if we drop the ball, then the universe, or at least our little corner of it, will fall apart. But Hebrews 1 is telling us that the universe is held by *him*. It was never held by us.

You can put the weight of your world down.

You were never holding it up in the first place.

Of course, it's only human to be afraid when we feel that our children are at risk. But what we do with that fear will show us who we are depending on. Are we depending on Jesus's sustaining power? Or our own efforts?

What we need more than parenting techniques is the theology of *upholding*. When we recognize that Jesus is the active Sustainer of our children, we are freed from trying to be that for them. We can stop trying to be Atlas. Instead, we can be reminded that we are children of God seeking to learn and grow. This frees us from taking responsibility for things outside of our control.

If your child is walking through hardship, if they are out of sight, or if they are wandering in a spiritually far-off country, they have not slipped from his hands. He is upholding them even now, even if it looks different from what you would prefer. He is nearer to your child than their own breath.

But Is He Good?

At this point, a reasonable objection arises. *Power* is one thing. *Goodness* is another. A hurricane is powerful. A dictator is powerful. Neither is good. If God is upholding all things, including my child's suffering, my family's hardships, and our seasons of doubt and loss, then power alone is not comforting. In fact, an omnipotent but indifferent God is terrifying. *If he is upholding all things, why is he upholding this pain?* C. S. Lewis addressed this in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. When the children in the book first hear about Aslan, the great Lion, they ask if he is safe. Lewis writes, "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."[1] A safe God serves our agenda. A safe God would ensure our children never struggle, never fail, never doubt, never suffer. But this is not the God of the Bible, nor the God of our experiences, either. The question is not "Will God insulate our children from difficulty?" He will not. The real question is whether his purposes in allowing difficulty are loving and good.

The answer is found at the cross.

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" This is the logic of the gospel, and it is the gospel truth that quiets our parenting anxiety. The costliest thing God ever did, the greatest expenditure of his glory and his heart, was giving his Son to die for us. The cross was not cheap. It required the eternal

Son of God to live under the law we had broken, endure the mockery and brutality of those he created, and bear in his body the full weight of divine judgment against our sin. The Father watched his beloved Son be crushed under the weight of the world's wickedness—including yours, mine, and our children's.

If God were willing to pay that infinite price to rescue you and your children from eternal judgment, would he not care about all the other details of your lives? If he did not withhold his most precious treasure, would he suddenly become indifferent to our children's struggles with learning disabilities or crises of faith or broken friendships?

The hands that hold the universe together are the same hands that were nailed to a cross for you. Power and love are united in the same Person. The cross is the place where we know his love. He chose to suffer on our behalf. That proves his goodness. You may not always know *why* a particular suffering is permitted, but you know this much: It cannot be that he does not care. He proved he cared at the greatest possible cost.

Whether religious or not, we are all, in the end, asking the same question in the storm: Why is this happening? Every parenting approach has an implicit answer. Religious parents might wonder if they haven't done enough—if they need to work harder to earn God's blessing. Secular parents, on the other hand, have no assurance that suffering means anything at all and no promise that things will be made right in the end. But Christian parents *know* something different. They know God proved he was for us at the cross, and that proof does not expire. We are not parenting into a cold, empty universe. We are in a story that's moving toward redemption, carried by the One who has already proven his perfect goodness.

A Sympathetic Savior

Perhaps you're still not convinced. You may be thinking, *Yes, Jesus is powerful. Yes, the cross proves he is loving in a cosmic sense. But does he actually understand what I am going through right now? Does he have any idea what it feels like to worry about a child?* The writer of Hebrews anticipates this question too. He says,

> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:15–16)

The author is not saying that Jesus knows about our struggles from a distance, the way a well-read doctor might understand a disease he has never had. Jesus does not observe our weakness; he shares it. He lived within it. Think about what this means. Jesus knew what it was like to be utterly dependent on imperfect parents. He felt the confusion of growing up in a world that did not understand him. He endured rejection, betrayal, loneliness, grief, and physical agony. Why does all this matter?

In Jesus, authority and tenderness meet.

Authority without tenderness would be terrifying. If Jesus were merely powerful, we might obey him, but we wouldn't trust him with our deepest fears. We would acknowledge his power, but we wouldn't bring him our anxieties. However, tenderness without authority is ultimately useless. We need more than emotional support; we need someone who can *act*.

Jesus is both. He commands legions of angels, and he holds children in his arms. He will judge the nations, and he calls the weary to find rest. The hands that hold the universe are the same hands that wash our feet. Christianity hinges on a man who dies for his enemies. When you place him at the core of your life, it changes everything, especially how you see other people around you—even your own children.

The author of Hebrews wants us to see that the true throne of the universe is a *throne of grace.* Not a throne of performance review. Not a throne of conditional acceptance. Grace. We can come with our 3 a.m. failures, fumbled conversations, and insufficient answers. We can come before God with confidence because he has experienced everything we have. If you feel overwhelmed by raising children in a world that seems to pull them away from what God wants, remember that Jesus understands. If you are tired from correcting and teaching your children and not seeing immediate results, Jesus understands. He spent years with twelve disciples only to have one betray him, one deny him, and the rest leave him when he needed them most. He knows what it's like to love imperfect people who constantly break his heart. He knows what it's like to have spiritual children who stray.

When you look at the daunting task of raising children in a world without a shared moral framework, a world that makes sexuality ultimate and places a constant, crushing pressure on performance, it's easy to feel hopelessly outmatched. Jesus understands. He has faced it all, and he invites you to bring it all to him. Not when you've cleaned it up. Not after you have improved. But in your time of need. Scripture says to "draw near" to God the Father, not because you have confidence in your parenting, but because you have confidence in him (Hebrews 4:16). That is the foundation.

Two Postures at the Same Dinner Table

It's dinnertime. Your child drops her backpack, and you can tell something is weighing on her. You ask. She says, "Jake's dad has cancer. He was crying at school. Why would God let that happen?" Let's look at two different dinner-table responses. At the first table, the parent feels concern, but that quickly becomes more of a burden as the parent thinks, *This is one of those moments when what I say next matters enormously*. So the parent either launches into a carefully managed theological response that starts with "Well, the Bible says God works all things for good, and sometimes we can't see how hard things like cancer draw us near to him. . . ." Or they redirect the conversation: "That sounds so sad. . . ." and then the subject is changed to something easier to talk about. In the first response, the child gets a technically correct answer, but it's prepackaged and doesn't invite discussion or dialogue. In the second response, when the child is redirected, the message they get is that hard questions are not welcome at this table. In both cases parents may convince themselves that they did their job, but in both cases the child learns not to bring these questions home.

At the second table, something different happens. Not because this parent is more loving than the parent at the first table, and not because this parent has some superior theological knowledge. The difference is interior. This parent has been slowly, imperfectly, over years and years, realizing that they are not the one holding their child. This experience does something to their posture. They can sit with the question.

Then they can say, "That's a really hard question, and I don't have the complete answer," and mean it without panic. Then, from a place of real rest rather than performance, they can say, "Jake's dad being sick is terrible. We should pray for that family and bring them a meal. You're asking one of the

biggest questions in the world. Smart, thoughtful people have wrestled with it for a long time. I wrestle with it too. I don't know the full answer, but here is what I know. God cares so much about cancer, and all of our brokenness and sin, that he came to earth in Jesus, dying on the cross to save us all and fix the world. So when I ask, 'Does God care? Why does he allow this to happen?' I know the answer is not that he doesn't love us, because he came to die for us. And if he can take the worst thing in the world to happen—Jesus dying on the cross—and turn it for good, then I think God can somehow take this cancer and do something with it as well, even if we can't see it. Jesus on the cross means God will not leave us in our suffering, and we won't leave Jake's family either. What should we take them?"

The parent at the second table does not love their child any better than the first parent, but they do have a different center of gravity and posture. This is what the shift from performance-based parenting to gospel parenting looks like in an actual room.

It is not a shift in technique; it is a shift in who is holding your child.

The first parent, underneath the prepackaged answer and the deflection, believes it is still up to them. The second parent believes it is Christ, and when that belief moves from the head to the heart—not just something you intellectually affirm but what you really inhabit—that changes how you walk into every hard conversation. You don't have to have all the answers because you are not their savior.

The Most Powerful Thing You Can Do

The most radical thing in this chapter, and possibly the whole book, is for you to get this truth: The most powerful thing

you can do for your children's faith is not to craft the perfect answer to their hard questions. It is to let them see you rest in Christ—to rest in a way that has no visible explanation except that you believe that God is your upholder and sustainer. We are not primarily rational beings, so your children will not be primarily convinced by arguments. They are formed by witness and story. Having a flawless theological answer to every challenging question is not the way to be the best witness to your children. You are the best witness when you are clearly held by something greater than the crisis you are facing. When you can say, "Since the ultimate outcome is in God's hands, I can focus on being faithful with what God has put in front of me right now." Children can see and feel the difference.

Children can tell the difference between parents who pray because it's what they're supposed to do and parents who pray because something is actually happening when they do. When you rest in this way, you are able to have a non-anxious presence, and your child can sense it. They will be drawn to it—not by argument but by the witness of a life that has been changed by grace.

When your child brings you that hard question with no easy answer and you do not buckle or panic, they will notice. Even if they are unable to identify what they are seeing, they will remember it years later when they are going through difficult times of their own: *Dad didn't fall apart. Mom didn't lose it.* Christianity isn't true because it works; it works because it is true, and they will see that in your steadiness as you rest on Jesus.

Every moment carries the weight of eternity if you think that one moment will ultimately determine your child's future. Homework becomes the key to their future happiness. A college rejection feels like a cosmic failure. A spiritual doubt feels like an irreversible collapse. But if Jesus truly upholds all

things, and if he is good, then your identity is not tied to your child's performance. When you believe that Jesus graciously upholds *all* things, and that he is *good*, that changes how you think about success. Faithfulness begins to matter more than just outcomes. It stops being measured by the things of this world. Instead, your focus is on following Jesus, and when you notice you have lost your way, you quickly turn to him in repentance and faith.

It also changes how parents think about failure. A bad report card, a social rejection, or a spiritual struggle doesn't mean God has abandoned us. Parents can remain confident that the One who holds their children is stronger than any objection they will encounter on social media or in college. We let teenagers wrestle with doubt because our hope is in Christ, not in airtight arguments. Parents can apologize and repent without losing authority. We can discipline firmly without defending our egos. We can engage questions about sexuality, injustice, or suffering honestly because we trust the Spirit to work beyond our words.

This is what the rest of this book is about: engaging the hard topics with courage. We are *not* offering you a foolproof method.

We are offering a foolproof Person: Jesus.

We are not giving you a method that, if recited perfectly, will guarantee a result. We are offering you grace. If the gospel is going to shape your home, it will first have to keep shaping you, slowly, imperfectly, over time. In the classic story of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the Skin Horse explains that "real" isn't how you are made; it's a thing that happens to you when someone loves you for a long, long time.[2] The more deeply you know you are loved by God, the more "real" you become, and the less you will need your children to be more than what they are as you point them to the One who holds all things together.

A Word of Hope

The best thing you can do for your children is to grow in your faith, not perfect your parenting. This is good news because faith is a gift that God gives to all who ask. Your children are watching to see if your faith makes a difference when life happens. They will not be convinced by your words about grace if they never see you resting in grace. They will not believe that Jesus is the Prince of Peace if their home is governed by your anxiety. As you learn to rest in Jesus's upholding power, your home will become a place where that rest is tangible. As you bring your anxieties to the throne of grace and find mercy there, your children will learn that they can do the same. As you model repentance and forgiveness, you show them what the gospel looks like in real life.

My parents would be eager to tell you they were not the best parents. I won't argue. But they gave me a gift growing up in their home: They forgave and repented to one another in front of me, and *to* me. The world does not forgive and repent, so when I saw that modeled, even when I was furthest away from faith, I had to contend with the fact that the gospel creates people who own and admit their flaws and don't always require payment for the injury those flaws cause. They did not do this perfectly, but it was visible, and what you cannot explain any other way, you eventually have to deal with. When it happened later in my life, it was part of my story of returning to the Christian faith.

The most powerful testimony your child will ever hear is that Jesus is enough for you. That he's actually enough to alter your behavior during difficult times. You won't always feel that way, though. There will be those times at three in the morning when the fear is thick and the rest is thin. There will be awkward conversations, awkward questions, and times when

your anxiety overwhelms you and you are powerless to stop it. However, it's not the end. It is just the beginning of the other half of the witness: a parent who apologizes.

A parent who never messes up can never apologize. But a parent who can say, "I got scared there. I was wrong. I didn't handle that well. I'm sorry. Forgive me," is a parent who is still witnessing to their child the power of grace. Because the world does not do that either. The world performs or deflects, but a parent who owns their failure is witnessing to the gospel in real time. In my experience, this has a bigger impact than a thousand airtight theological answers. The transformation you experience through a real encounter with Jesus in your life will do more for your children than any technique you could offer. The sweetest truth in this chapter is this: *Jesus loves your children more than you do.* More than you are capable of. He created them. He sustains them. He is more committed to their flourishing than even the most devoted parent. He can raise the dead, which you cannot do. He can purify their hearts, which you cannot do. So take a breath.

Put down the weight you were never meant to bear.

The universe is in good hands, and so are your children.

The chapters ahead will give you the tools and framework for hard conversations. They will help you teach like Jesus taught, engage culture, and love your neighbor, including the ones your kids are watching you interact with. However, all of that won't help if you are gripping them in fear. You are not Atlas. You never were. You are the signpost, pointing your children again and again to the One who holds everything together. A signpost doesn't need to be the destination. It just needs to point (to) the Way.

Now, let's talk about how to talk to them about the hard things.

Questions for Reflection

1. Where do you feel the weight of "Atlas parenting" most acutely? Is it in your children's academics, social standing, spiritual choices, or physical safety? What specific outcomes are you trying to control?

2. How does the truth that Jesus "sustaining all things by his powerful word" change the way you view your child's current struggles? If you truly believed he was active in their life right now, what would you stop doing? What would you start doing?

3. Do you struggle more with believing God is powerful or believing God is good? When your child suffers, where does your mind go—to God's indifference or God's impotence? How does Romans 8:32 speak to that fear?

4. When you fail as a parent (lose your temper, forget a promise, handle a situation poorly), do you run *from* God in shame or turn *to* the throne of grace? Do you do this in front of your children?

5. What would it look like for your children to see you actually resting in Christ this week? Would it mean an apology? A less frantic schedule? A conversation where you admitted you didn't know the answer?