

CHAPTER 5

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My Child Is  
in Danger

Don't be afraid. Just believe, and your daughter will be well.

—LUKE 8:50 NCV

## *Fear of Not Protecting My Kids*

No one told me that newborns make nighttime noises. All night long. They gurgle; they pant. They whimper; they whine. They smack their lips and sigh. They keep Daddy awake. At least Jenna kept me awake. I wanted Denalyn to sleep. Thanks to a medication mix-up, her post-C-section rest was scant. So for our first night home with our first child, I volunteered to serve as first responder. We wrapped our eight pounds and four ounces of beauty in a soft pink blanket, placed her in the bassinet, and set it next to my side of the bed. Denalyn fell quickly into a sound slumber. Jenna followed her mom's example. And Dad? This dad didn't know what to make of the baby noises.

When Jenna's breathing slowed, I leaned my ear onto her mouth to see if she was alive. When her breathing hurried, I looked up "infant hyperventilation" in the family medical encyclopedia. When she burbled and panted, so did I. After a couple of hours I realized, *I have no clue how to behave!* I lifted Jenna out of her bed, carried her into the living

room of our apartment, and sat in a rocker. That's when a tsunami of sobriety washed over me.

"We're in charge of a human being."

I don't care how tough you are. You may be a Navy SEAL who specializes in high-altitude skydiving behind enemy lines. You might spend each day making million-dollar, split-second stock market decisions. Doesn't matter. Every parent melts the moment he or she feels the full force of parenthood.

I did.

*How did I get myself into this?* I retraced my steps. First came love, then came marriage, then the *discussions* of a baby carriage. Of course I was open to the idea. Especially when I considered my role in launching the effort. Somehow during the nine-month expansion project, the reality of fatherhood didn't dawn on me. Women are nodding and smiling. "Never underestimate the density of a man," you say. True. But moms have an advantage: thirty-six weeks of reminders elbowing around inside them. Our kick in the gut comes later. But it does come. And for me it came in the midnight quiet of an apartment living room in downtown Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, as I held a human being in my arms.

The semitruck of parenting comes loaded with fears. We fear failing the child, forgetting the child. Will we have enough money? Enough answers? Enough diapers? Enough drawer space? Vaccinations. Educations. Homework. Homecoming. It's enough to keep a parent awake at night.

And even though we learn to cope, an apiary of dangers buzzes in the background. Consider the mom who called me last evening. A custody battle rages around her ten-year-old son. The courts, the father, the mother, the lawyers—they're stretching the boy like taffy. She wonders if her child will survive the ordeal.

So do the parents of the teenage daughter who collapsed in a volleyball workout. No one knew about her heart condition or knows how she'll fare. When we prayed at her bedside, her mom's tears left circles on the sheets.

At least they know where their child is. The mother who called our church for prayers doesn't. Her daughter, a high school senior, ran away with a boyfriend. He's into drugs. She's into him. Both are into trouble. The mother begs for help.

Fear distilleries concoct a high-octane brew for parents—a primal, gut-wrenching, pulse-stilling dose. Whether Mom and Dad keep vigil outside a neonatal unit, make weekly visits to a juvenile prison, or hear the crunch of a bike and the cry of a child in the driveway, their reaction is the same: "I have to do something." No parent can sit still while his or her child suffers.

Jairus couldn't.

On the other side of the lake the crowds welcomed Jesus, because they had been waiting for him. Then a man named Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue, came and fell at Jesus' feet, pleading with him to come home with him. His only daughter, who was about twelve years old, was dying. As Jesus went with him, he was surrounded by the crowds. (Luke 8:40–42 NLT)

Jairus was a Capernaum community leader, "one of the rulers of the synagogue" (Mark 5:22). Mayor, bishop, and ombudsman, all in one. The kind of man a city would send to welcome a celebrity. But when Jairus approached Jesus on the Galilean shoreline, he wasn't representing his village; he was pleading on behalf of his child.

Urgency stripped the formalities from his greeting. He issued no salutation or compliment, just a prayer of panic. Another gospel reads: “[Jairus] fell at his feet, pleading fervently with him. ‘My little daughter is dying,’ he said. ‘Please come and lay your hands on her; heal her so she can live’” (Mark 5:22–23 NLT).

Jairus isn’t the only parent to run onto gospel pages on behalf of a child. A mother stormed out of the Canaanite hills, crying, “Mercy, Master, Son of David! My daughter is cruelly afflicted by an evil spirit” (Matt. 15:22 MSG). A father of a seizure-tormented boy sought help from the disciples, then Jesus. He cried out with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

The Canaanite mother. The father of the epileptic boy. Jairus. These three parents form an unwitting New Testament society: struggling parents of stricken children. They held the end of their rope in one hand and reached toward Christ with the other. In each case Jesus responded. He never turned one away.

His consistent kindness issues a welcome announcement: Jesus heeds the concern in the parent’s heart.

After all, our kids were his kids first. “Don’t you see that children are GOD’s best gift? the fruit of the womb his generous legacy?” (Ps. 127:3 MSG). Before they were ours, they were his. Even as they are ours, they are still his.

We tend to forget this fact, regarding our children as “our” children, as though we have the final say in their health and welfare. We don’t. All people are God’s people, including the small people who sit at our tables. Wise are the parents who regularly give their children back to God.

Abraham famously modeled this. The father of the faith was also

the father of Isaac. Abraham and Sarah waited nearly a century for this child to be born. I don't know which is more amazing, that Sarah became pregnant at the age of ninety or that she and Abraham at that age were still trying to conceive. Of all the gifts God gave them, Isaac was the greatest. Of all the commands God gave Abraham, this one was the hardest: "He said, 'Take your dear son Isaac whom you love and go to the land of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I'll point out to you'" (Gen. 22:2 MSG).

Abraham saddled the donkey, took Isaac and two servants, and traveled to the place of sacrifice. When he saw the mountain in the distance, he instructed the servants to stay and wait. And he made a statement that is worthy of special note: "Stay here with the donkey. My son and I will go over there and worship, and then we will come back to you" (Gen. 22:5 NCV).

Look at Abraham's confident "*we will come back.*" "Abraham reasoned that if Isaac died, God was able to bring him back to life again. And in a sense, Abraham did receive his son back from the dead" (Heb. 11:19 NLT). God interrupted the sacrifice and spared Isaac.

Jairus was hoping for the same with his daughter. He begged Jesus to come to his home (Luke 8:41). The father wasn't content with long-distance assistance; he wanted Christ beneath his roof, walking through his rooms, standing at the bedside of his daughter. He wanted the presence of Christ to permeate his house.

My wife displays this same longing. I will someday ask God, "Why were you so good to my daughters and me?" and he will answer by pointing to Denalyn. "She just kept talking about you and your kids." Denalyn takes regular prayer walks through our house, stepping into each bedroom and living area. She pauses to pray for her daughters and

husband. She takes full advantage of the invitation of Lamentations 2:19: “Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord. Lift your hands toward Him for the life of your young children” (Lam. 2:19).

Parents, we can do this. We can be loyal advocates, stubborn intercessors. We can take our parenting fears to Christ. In fact, if we don’t, we’ll take our fears out on our kids. Fear turns some parents into paranoid prison guards who monitor every minute, check the background of every friend. They stifle growth and communicate distrust. A family with no breathing room suffocates a child.

On the other hand, fear can also create permissive parents. For fear that their child will feel too confined or fenced in, they lower all boundaries. High on hugs and low on discipline. They don’t realize that appropriate discipline is an expression of love. Permissive parents. Paranoid parents. How can we avoid the extremes? We pray.

Prayer is the saucer into which parental fears are poured to cool. Jesus says so little about parenting, makes no comments about spanking, breast-feeding, sibling rivalry, or schooling. Yet his actions speak volumes about prayer. Each time a parent prays, Christ responds. His big message to moms and dads? Bring your children to me. Raise them in a greenhouse of prayer.

When you send them off for the day, do so with a blessing. When you tell them good night, cover them in prayer. Is your daughter stumped by geography homework? Pray with her about it. Is your son intimidated by the new girl? Pray with him about her. Pray that your children have a profound sense of place in this world and a heavenly place in the next.

Some years ago I witnessed a father taking this priority seriously

during a Sunday morning worship service. As we took communion, I heard a small boy asking, "What's that, Daddy?" The father explained the meaning of the bread and then offered a prayer. The boy was quiet until the cup was passed. Then he asked again, "What's that, Daddy?" The father began again, explaining the blood and the cross and how the wine symbolizes Jesus' death. Then he prayed.

I chuckled at the colossal task the father was tackling. When I turned to give him a knowing nod, I realized the father was David Robinson, NBA basketball player for the San Antonio Spurs. Sitting on his lap was his six-year-old son, David Jr.

Less than twenty-four hours earlier David had led the Spurs in scoring in a play-off game against the Phoenix Suns. Within twenty-four hours David would be back in Phoenix, doing the same. But sandwiched between the two nationally televised, high-stakes contests was David the dad. Not David the MVP or Olympic Gold Medal winner, but David the father, explaining holy communion to David the son.

Of the events of that weekend, which mattered most? The basketball games or the communion service? Which will have eternal consequences? The points scored on the court? Or the message shared at church? What will make the biggest difference in young David's life? Watching his dad play basketball or hearing him whisper a prayer?

Parents, we can't protect children from every threat in life, but we can take them to the Source of life. We can entrust our kids to Christ. Even then, however, our shoreline appeals may be followed by a difficult choice.

As Jairus and Jesus were going to Jairus's home, "a messenger arrived from the home of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue. He told him, 'Your daughter is dead. There's no use troubling the Teacher now.' But when

Jesus heard what had happened, he said to Jairus, ‘Don’t be afraid. Just have faith, and she will be healed’” (Luke 8:49–50 NLT).

Jairus was whipsawed between the contrasting messages. The first, from the servants: “Your daughter is dead.” The second, from Jesus: “Don’t be afraid.” Horror called from one side. Hope compelled from the other. Tragedy, then trust. Jairus heard two voices and had to choose which one he would heed.

Don’t we all?

The hard reality of parenting reads something like this: you can do your best and still stand where Jairus stood. You can protect, pray, and keep all the bogeymen at bay and still find yourself in an ER at midnight or a drug rehab clinic on visitors’ Sunday, choosing between two voices: despair and belief. Jairus could have chosen despair. Who would have faulted him for deciding “Enough is enough”? He had no guarantee that Jesus could help. His daughter was dead. Jairus could have walked away. As parents, we’re so glad he didn’t. We need to know what Jesus will do when we entrust our kids to him.

He *united the household*. “When Jesus went to the house, he let only Peter, John, James, and the girl’s father and mother go inside with him” (Luke 8:51 NCV).

Jesus included the mother. Until this point she had been, for whatever reason, out of the picture. Perhaps she was at her daughter’s bedside. Or she might have been at odds with her husband. Crisis can divide a family. The stress of caring for a sick or troubled child can drive a wedge between Mom and Dad. But here, Christ united them. Picture Jesus pausing at the house entrance, gesturing for the distraught mother to join them. He didn’t have to do so. He could have hurried in without her. But he wanted Mom and Dad to stand together in the struggle.

Jesus gathered the entire, albeit small, household in the presence of the daughter.

And he *banished unbelief*. “Now all wept and mourned for her; but He said, ‘Do not weep; she is not dead, but sleeping.’ And they ridiculed Him, knowing that she was dead. But He put them all outside” (vv. 52–54).

He commanded doubt to depart and permitted only faith and hope to stay. And in this intimate circle of trust, Jesus “took her by the hand and called, saying, ‘Little girl, arise.’ Then her spirit returned, and she arose immediately. And He commanded that she be given something to eat. And her parents were astonished” (vv. 54–56).

God has a heart for hurting parents. Should we be surprised? After all, God himself is a father. What parental emotion has he not felt? Are you separated from your child? So was God. Is someone mistreating your child? They mocked and bullied his. Is someone taking advantage of your children? The Son of God was set up by false testimony and betrayed by a greedy follower. Are you forced to watch while your child suffers? God watched his son on the cross. Do you find yourself wanting to spare your child from all the hurt in the world? God did. But because of his great love for us, “he did not spare his own Son but gave him for us all. So with Jesus, God will surely give us all things” (Rom. 8:32 NCV).

“All things” must include courage and hope.

Some of you find the story of Jairus difficult to hear. You prayed the same prayer he did, yet you found yourself in a cemetery facing every parent’s darkest night: the death of your child. No pain compares. What hope does the story of Jairus offer to you? Jesus resurrected Jairus’s child. Why didn’t he save yours?

God understands your question. He buried a child too. He hates

death more than you do. That's why he killed it. He "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light" (2 Tim. 1:10). For those who trust God, death is nothing more than a transition to heaven. Your child may not be in your arms, but your child is safely in his.

Others of you have been standing for a long time where Jairus stood. You've long since left the water's edge of offered prayer but haven't yet arrived at the household of answered prayer. You've wept a monsoon of tears for your child, enough to summon the attention of every angel and their neighbor to your cause. At times you've felt that a breakthrough was nearing, that Christ was following you to your house. But you're not so sure anymore. You find yourself alone on the path, wondering if Christ has forgotten you and your child.

He hasn't. He never dismisses a parent's prayer. Keep giving your child to God, and in the right time and the right way, God will give your child back to you.

Late that night a quarter century ago, I gave my daughter to God. As I rocked her in our just-bought rocker, I remembered the way Abraham had placed Isaac on the altar, and I decided to do the same. So following the centenarian's example, I made our apartment living room my Moriah and lifted my daughter toward heaven. *I can't raise this girl*, I confessed, *but you can. I give her back to you.* Must have been a sight to behold, a pajama-clad father lifting his blanket-wrapped baby toward the ceiling. But something tells me that a few parents appreciated the gesture. Among them, Abraham, Jairus, and, of course, God.