

INTRODUCTION

OUR PARENTAL PLEA:
“GIVE ME A PARENTING HOW-TO MANUAL!”

It’s a natural desire: we all want a how-to manual for parenting. Manoah and his wife—the parents of Samson—were no exception. Having remained childless for decades, imagine the excitement Manoah’s wife experiences when the angel of the Lord appears with this promise:

You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He

will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines (Judges 13:3–5).

Her mind is racing as she races to Manoah. Her words gush out of her overflowing soul as she tells her husband of her encounter:

A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name. But he said to me, "You will become pregnant and have a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from the womb until the day of his death" (Judges 13:6–7).

Manoah can no longer contain himself. He's thinking, "What? We've waited all these years to have a child. An ambassador from God comes and he doesn't leave us a parenting manual! This man must come back!" That's the message of Manoah's prayer in verse 8: "Then Manoah prayed to the LORD: 'Pardon your servant, Lord. I beg you to let the man

of God you sent to us come again to teach us *how to* bring up the boy who is to be born” (emphasis added).

Isn't that the normal prayer of every Christian parent? “Please, Father, teach me, guide me, direct me, instruct me *how to* raise my child.”

In Manoah's case, we're told that God heard his prayer. The messenger of God returned. He handed Manoah the latest edition of *Fifty Steps to Raising Your Children for Yahweh* and then left. Manoah, his wife, and their son, Samson, lived happily ever after . . .

Then again, perhaps it happened like this. The angel of the Lord comes again to Manoah's wife. Again, she races to her husband. “He's here, Manoah! The man who appeared to me the other day has returned. God has answered your prayer.” Manoah follows his wife, races to the man, and asks, “Are you the man who talked to my wife?”

“I am,” he says.

So Manoah asks, “When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule that governs the boy's life and work?” (Judges 13:12). There it is *again*: a second request for a *how-to* manual.

“How shall we order our parenting? What list of rules will lead, guide, and direct us step by step?”

The angel of the Lord answers, “Your wife must do all that I have told her. She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her” (Judges 13:13–14).

Manoah’s jaw drops. “Huh? What’s that? Couldn’t you leave us a scroll or papyri manual? What about a list? Some steps? Something?”

Rather than giving Samson’s parents a list, the angel of the Lord exhorts them toward a lifestyle: a God-dependent, God-glorifying, God-trusting, God-surrendered lifestyle. That’s the cultural meaning of the Nazirite vow that Manoah, his wife, and their son were to fulfil. It was a commitment to consecrate and dedicate their life to God through a living faith embodied by a daily trust in God alone. The sustenance of the day was the fruit of the grapevine. To choose not to drink that was to live like Jesus lived in Matthew 4:4: “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Manoah and his wife desired what every Christian parent desires: “Father, teach me *how* to parent my child.” Our Father answers our prayer, but in His way, not ours. His parenting manual has one “rule,” one “commandment.” It goes like this:

**Parent, be Christlike
by being God-dependent.**

God’s Parental Prime Directive

This is the same message we receive from Paul in Ephesians. Paul pens 134 verses about gospel-dependent living in Ephesians 1:1–6:3, before he offers us one verse on parenting: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). That verse is important, and we’ll even use it as our theme verse. However, it is *one* verse in a larger gospel-centered, Christ-dependent context.

When I counsel parents, they often expect me to race with them to Ephesians 6:4. Or, if their teens are in the session, they insist that we

run to Ephesians 6:1–3 and Paul’s command that children honor and obey their parents. Initially they are a tad surprised when we start by exploring gospel-centered principles like:

- Our life purpose as parents and children to glorify God (Ephesians 1).
- Our lifelong need for Christ because of our guilt before God (Ephesians 2).
- Our lifelong dependence upon Christ for grace from God (Ephesians 2–3).
- Our lifelong power for growth through God’s Spirit (Ephesians 3–6).

Judges 13 and Ephesians 1–6 convey the same parental prime directive from God:

To become a more powerful parent, we must become a more godly person: a person dedicated to dependence upon God.

GRACE-Focused Parenting

You may be wondering, “But I thought this *Raising Kids* series was marked by practical principles for parenting? Where does that fit into all this God-dependence stuff?” It’s a both/and. Far too many Christian books on parenting are either/or. Either they focus exclusively on how-to principles, or they focus exclusively on gospel-centered living on the part of the parent. This series and this book blend both.

Here we’ll build upon a gospel-centered focus of Christ-dependence by looking at five practical marks of GRACE-focused parenting. But these five marks would be nothing more than steps and how-to principles unless we ground them in hearts surrendered to Christ. Without that Christ-dependence, our application of these principles would be like our results-driven world. We’d end up being Pharisaical parents raising Pharisaical kids. Our longing is to be GRACE-focused parents raising GRACE-saturated kids.

We’ll build upon Ephesians 6:4 *in the context of Paul’s gospel-centered letter*, to develop the following five marks of GRACE-focused parenting:

- G** Mark 1: **God-dependent** parents—parental dedication
- R** Mark 2: **Revelation-based** parental wisdom—parental discernment
- A** Mark 3: **Affectionate and Affirming** grace relationships—parental devotion
- C** Mark 4: **Care-fronting** our children's hearts—parental discipline
- E** Mark 5: **Equipping** our children for the race of life—parental discipleship

Our prayer is that through Christ's grace to us as parents we can raise GRACE-saturated kids in a results-driven world. Whatever else our children might need, we want their lives to be surrounded by grace and their hearts always attracted by and to Christ's grace.