

Marriage & Family Roundtable

Mart: Now I wonder if we were to do a survey and, Larry, maybe you're aware of surveys that have been done, research, that if you were to ask married people the question—and I'm sure it's been done—"What were you looking for when you entered into marriage? What were we looking for when we got married, and what did we get? What did you get?" my guess is that a lot of people are hurting, even to think about the difference between what we were looking for and what we got. You found that, haven't you? They've walked through your door. They've walked through my door.

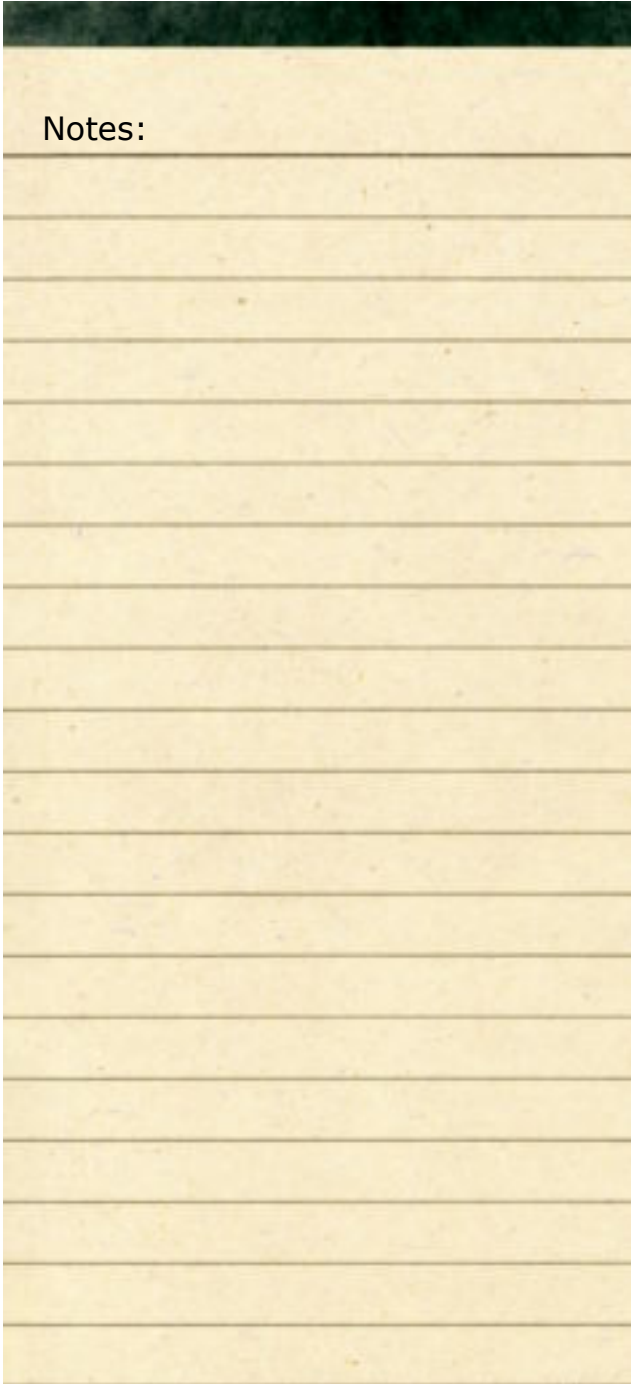
Joe: I don't think anybody ever gets married because they don't like the other person. It just gets that way and the problem is, you know, how do you keep from getting it that way? And what do you do when it has gotten that way? Because it does happen, doesn't it?

Larry: I met Rachel when we were 10 years old.

Mart: You're kidding. Ten?

Larry: We couldn't begin dating. She was going steady with Carl. But when she broke up with Carl at age 12 (this is a true story), we had our first date. We sat together in a youth meeting and shared a hymn book. That was our first date. We got married at 21, and I certainly expected this was going to be just a, you know, oh, conflicts of course, but I never dreamed that about 15,

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17 years into our marriage—when I’d been in private practice, I’d written some books on marriage—that my wife one night got out of bed, and said, “I cannot endure you any longer. I’m going to pack my bags, and I’m going to leave.” That happened in our marriage after 15, 16 years. I could tell you many more stories, the kind of levels of conflict that lots of folks wouldn’t believe when they see me up front teaching whatever. But let me tell you it’s been a struggle, and I never anticipated that the struggles were to be as deep and as difficult as they’ve been.

Mart: Well, I haven’t either. In entering into marriage, I was looking for happiness. We dearly loved one another, and we had the same kind of experiences multiple times along the way. Never would have dreamed the difficulty. I’m sure Di had far higher expectations of me than what she got, and it’s been an up and down road. It has. It’s been difficult, and I know that that can be very typical of what a lot of people struggle with.

Larry: And it continues to be. We have a good marriage. I don’t want to try to relate to folks that are in terrible shape by saying I’m in terrible shape, because I’m really not. There are some wonderful things in our marriage, and yet I was just sharing last night with a close friend that I sometimes recently have felt a low-grade frustration with Rachel that when some little trigger seems to bring it out, I can just snap. I can be angry. I can say things that are unkind. And we, I think, have learned that the ongoing struggles in our marriage are not only survivable but

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can lead in good directions only if, not if we avoid conflict because we don't know how to do that, but only if there's some fundamental sense within us that I'm for her and she's for me. That is not easy to come by. That's in us, and if it weren't for that I think the conflicts would have ruined our marriage.

Mart: Yeah, because it's like you have these wonderful experiences, these moments when you realize there's nobody in the world I love like this woman. I'd give anything for her. And a few minutes later, a few hours later, all of a sudden you can be just saying, "I want out of here." This is ridiculous. This is—how two people who love one another so much and know in our better moments that we need one another, how these feelings, these emotions, can come into our lives.

You go through these phases. I think late in marriage, later in marriage. I love Di better. There's part of me that says, "I don't know if I ever loved her when I thought I loved her." I think I'm beginning to understand that now, but then when I think I've got it, then it seems like all of a sudden now we're in a new phase. Now we're in a new complication, and I'm sure that people would come to us and they'd say, "That's where I am right now. I just feel like everything is broken so bad, I don't even know where to start anymore. We've tried so many times before."

Joe: Or I don't even know if I want to start anymore.

Mart: That's probably the reality of it. Where do you start?

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Where does a person who feels like it's just broken so bad, we've tried so many times to fix it, and now we're back in the same old spot again?

Larry: You know, one of the things that I think I've experienced very currently, as well as over the years, I have had a chance to talk to a number of Christian leaders and Christians that are just wonderful people that go to church, as opposed to being in leadership positions. I think it's the exception, the rare exception, that when I talk to a married couple and I have a chance to talk to them intimately, not necessarily in counseling, maybe over a long dinner and we get rather personal, it's the exception when I don't find that there are ongoing tensions that are severe, and I mean severe. Where there's just little irritabilities that just mount up. The number of women that have said to me—wives of sometimes prominent people; sometimes your average ordinary guy, who's just as valuable to God, of course—the wives that have said, "I've never felt like my husband has been present to me. I don't feel engaged with by my husband. He's just absent. He's nice. He doesn't beat me. We don't have any of those big, huge problems. I never feel touched in my soul. I just feel as lonely in my marriage as I can be." Or the husbands—talking to a guy just last week—the husbands that say that, "I can't have a conversation with my wife without feeling controlled. And it just irritates the socks off me, and there are times I just want to get away so far. I want to move out of the house half the time, I feel so bad." So I think we need, to me, the place to start is, and this

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sounds cliché, we've got to get honest. We've got to get honest about . . .

Mart: How do you do that without killing one other?

Larry: That's a bit of a challenge at times, but I think that the more honest you get, if in fact you're believers, if you're going to face the way things really are, what you discover is there's something beneath all the bad stuff that you're getting honest about. You know you've talked about the new covenant many times. I feel as strongly about that as you do that the Scriptures do teach that somehow in the center of my being—even when I'm just a lousy husband, even when I'm mad, even when I fail my wife, even when I feel failed by my wife and all I want to do is just watch television and ignore her—that if I were to get honest about that and say, “Right now, I feel hateful,” and the word *hate* maybe isn't too strong. “Right now, I'm so irritated,” but when I really get honest about that with myself and maybe with a good friend and maybe with my wife, there's some wisdom in how that means. Maybe I discover, not maybe I do discover, in the core of my soul there's something that's better, that all the junk that is getting in the way of my relationship. But you've got to start facing the junk. You can't pretend.

Mart: And you know that resonates with me because there are times when you know you try to stay in control because you realize you've stepped into this so many times and see that it

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doesn't go anywhere, so we try to show self-control. And then my wife Di will look at me and say, "You're angry, aren't you?"

Larry: No, no. I'm fine.

Joe: And what I would say—I would say, "I'm not angry. I'M NOT ANGRY!" you know, but I am. But I'm not being honest.

Mart: Exactly, and it's just . . . and it feels like: "What? Are you reading my mind?" I mean, I know what I'm thinking and so it's . . .but she senses in me a lot of times what I don't even want to admit.

Joe: You know, Larry, I just want to talk to you about the honesty thing because, you know, if we were talking to someone: "Just be honest with each other," so the guy goes home and he says, "Okay, I want to be honest with you. Actually I'm thinking very seriously about sleeping with my secretary." Or do you tell everything, or is it appropriate to . . . are there some things you don't tell, or maybe it's not the right time to tell?

Mart: There has to be boundaries, don't there, but then how can you be genuine and still have boundaries where you're not . . .

Larry: It's not boundaries with yourself. When I say to be honest, I'm not talking about go to your wife and tell her everything that you're thinking. I'm talking about being honest

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with yourself about yourself.

Mart: Okay.

Larry: Be honest about what's happening in you.

Joe: Like I am angry now.

Larry: Like I really am angry now. Does that mean I run to my wife and say, "I'm so mad I could kill you?" I'm not sure I'm saying that, but I'm saying: Am I willing to sit there and say, "Right now I hate this woman." What a horrible place to be.

Mart: But you don't express that?

Larry: That's what I feel.

Mart: But you don't express that?

Larry: I'm not going to suggest in a brief little interview exactly how to go about that, but I am going to suggest that of course there's wisdom in not saying certain things. I don't believe in total openness. I believe in radical commitment.

Mart: That's good.

Larry: I don't believe that total openness, where you start telling

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my wife I walked into the mall and noticed a pretty little girl over there, and I was saying, “Whoa, is she ever sexy! Let’s stop and pause so I can look at her for a while.” I’m not going to tell Rachel that, for crying out loud.

And of course there are those realities, but that’s what they have to be honest about, that within my own heart, I’m not totally sanctified. I’ve got a long way to go. As a matter of fact, I’ve got longer to go in becoming like Christ than I’ve already come.

Mart: And when you say sanctified, you mean I’m not . . .

Larry: All that I want to be.

Mart: Yeah, okay.

Larry: All the expectations of what I want to be.

Joe: Yeah, we’re all in process, aren’t we?

Larry: So things are a mess, and we’ve got to acknowledge that things are a mess. Remember the old book came out, *I’m OK – You’re OK?* I want to write a book some day called *I’m a Mess; You’re a Mess.*

Joe: Yeah right.

Larry: Because we are.

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Joe: And sometimes I think we hesitate to be honest because we're afraid of a crisis. We're afraid that it will ignite a moment, and I don't think we ought to be afraid of a crisis. You know, I think someone said very wisely, "A crisis is a horrible thing to waste." Sometimes it takes a crisis for us to come to grips with ourselves. And so if I'm willing to be honest, and it creates a nuclear explosion, maybe that nuclear explosion is the turning point in our marriage. We go seek help. We talk more openly with each other. So, all of that to say is for those of us who would like peace rather than growth in our marriage, if . . . don't be afraid of a crisis.

Larry: Peace, peace when there is no peace.

Joe: Yeah, exactly.

Larry: Yeah. You don't avoid an x-ray because you might have cancer. And it strikes me as important for me to put the x-ray on me, not just on Rachel, but for me to put the x-ray on me and to acknowledge that there's a lot of stuff going on inside of me that I frankly don't know how to deal with.

Mart: Okay, so if I feel that way, Larry, and I'm afraid of being honest, how do I get past then? What are the resources that I have that I can draw on to get past that fear of being honest in the appropriate way? Where do I start then?

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Larry: What I want to say maybe is two things. One is: Is there anybody in your world that you can share your worse secret with? Is there anybody in your world? Just a girlfriend. I'm not talking about a guy with a girlfriend, I'm talking about a woman with a woman friend.

Mart: Okay, a woman with a woman.

Larry: Yeah, a guy with a guy. Is there anybody in your world that you can sit and share? I have two, actually three friends that know just about everything there is to know about me. Now when I have those kinds of conversations, when I actually chat with somebody as I did very, very recently about a sense of irritation that's within that is not Rachel's fault. It's my weakness; it's my sinfulness. When I share that level of reality about me, I leave the conversation actually more in love with Rachel, more determined to be what I want to be because of God, but I've got to share that. I've got to share that meaningfully with a good friend. And that's the first thing I would say. The second thing I would say . . .

Mart: Can I just say what's so interesting about that is we're not talking about starting a conversation . . . when you're talking about starting with some other relationship in order to approach this one.

Larry: Oh sure.

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Mart: Right. In honesty with myself and maybe with someone else, you're saying maybe the best way to begin to know how to approach . . .

Larry: Never go to your grave with a secret. That's a horrible mistake, because you will never reach what you could reach in terms of your potential if you live with secrets. And I mean . . . some . . . how many guys have sexual secrets? How many guys are living with guilt? How many guys are living with shame because they're into pornography or just their own mental life is a porn show and they—if they've told nobody that and then the relationship with their wife keeps them from ever . . . because that porn stuff is going on in their mind, or whatever the secret might be, the power of shame keeps them from being able to engage deeply with their wives. Most men haven't got a clue, and I'm a guy so I'm talking a little bit too personal here. We don't have a clue what it means to actually touch the soul of our wife. What does it mean for our wife to feel like we're engaged? Let me sound a little bit crude here. Hope this isn't crude. I believe that the sexual act is a metaphor of the personal act. How do I enter my wife in a way that brings her deep pleasure? What does that mean? How many guys even think of that? They come home and expect dinner on the table. Yeah, is it even possible? Oh, Larry, you're in la-la land. Well, I've never gotten there either, but that's where I'm aiming; and I want to be thinking like that. I like my wife to believe that there's something inside of me that

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moves deeply into her, and she goes, “No one’s done that for me. This is wonderful.” Is that possible? Yeah, it is.

Joe: As I think about, you know, trying to wrestle with two real humans, fallen and frail as we are, becoming one as Scripture calls us to be, the joy of that increasing oneness. I think one of the triggers, and certainly something that moves into the soul of a wife or a husband, is humility. You know, if I’m willing to come to Marty and say, which I’ve had to do on occasion, “You know, I just want you to know I was so wrong to do that. I was wrong to say that. Will you forgive me? I don’t want to be that kind of a husband. I love you. You’re the greatest treasure in my life. And when I act like that I know how much that hurts you.” I mean there are very few wives that don’t have a sense of response to that.

Mart: But you may have to wait for it, right?

Joe: Of course you may have to. And here’s why you have to wait for it, is because she’s waiting to see if you really mean it or if you want to take her to bed that night. You know, she’s wondering, you know, is this—so then admitting it and asking for forgiveness means that I have to begin living it; living out that repentance and that forgiveness.

Larry: I’m thinking of a couple that I’m working with right now, if they’re listening to us talk I think they’d maybe click off the

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screen and say, “I know I should touch my wife’s soul. I know I should be there for my husband. I know all that. Yes, I agree with you there are struggles, but I just don’t want to do it. I’ve had it. I don’t know what the blocks are. I just . . . I have tried to move toward my wife a hundred different ways, and she always picks a fight. I’ve tried to be there for my husband, and I can’t seem to control whatever is ugly inside me. Things come out of me that are just awful. I don’t know why that’s happening. I hate it. I love Jesus. I’m a Christian. I want to be a Christian wife. And I’ve been at this thing now for how many years, and I’m still as ugly as I can be toward him at times—and explosions. I’m still as distant from her as I know I shouldn’t be and, yeah, I know I want to touch my wife’s soul. I don’t know how to do it. I’ve tried a thousand times. I haven’t got a clue. Thanks for nothing, guys. I’m out of here.” I think a lot of folks would feel like that—at least in folks that I’ve been working with recently—and, you know, . . .

Mart: Let me play that role. Let me come and just play: Okay, Larry, I’m done. I just can’t. I’ve tried a thousand times. I don’t want to do it any more. It hurts too much. I’m doing too much damage.”

Larry: Then leave if that’s what you want to do. Is that what you want to do?

Mart: Sometimes I want to leave.

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Larry: Now you said, “Sometimes.” Is that the core thing you want to do?

Mart: I just wish it was different, but I don’t think it can be anymore. It’s gone, Larry. We don’t have the feelings we had when we entered into marriage. We—when we had our first child, those feelings.

Larry: You’re trying to convince me that it’s justified for you to leave, because there’s no way to move?

Mart: I’m just saying we’re both tired. We’re both hurting one another. I hurt her so much. You can’t imagine the things I say to her.

Larry: So, what is in you that you want to do, given how frustrated and how futile the whole thing feels? What is it that you’re wanting to do at this point?

Mart: I feel like I’m looking across a chasm, Larry. I can’t get there.

Larry: You’re keeping describing where you are. Where do you want to go?

Mart: I want the way that we felt in the beginning, when we sat

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together and we just enjoyed talking together. We felt like we were sharing our hopes and our dreams together.

Larry: Now, as you role-play, let's be careful that if I had you for an hour or two I might not talk as tersely as I'm talking now.

Mart: Okay, all right. But go for it. All right.

Larry: I'd make it a little more gentle and a little . . .

Mart: We had these dreams, Larry.

Larry: So you're living in naivete. You're looking to go back to what you once had.

Mart: Now I'm living in realism.

Larry: But the realism is one of wanting to aleve the realism of where you are to go back to the way it once was. That's impossible.

Mart: You asked me what I wanted.

Larry: Now, is there anything that you would like that is realistic?

Mart: That's my problem sometimes. I don't feel it's realistic.

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Larry: Is there anything within you that you're willing to move toward your wife with regardless of the outcome of how your wife responds to you? Because what you're doing right now is being controlled by the fact that no matter what you try to do your wife is not responding, so therefore you feel totally futile.

Joe: Is there anything beyond the moment. I think sometimes we get caught in this "It's me and her, and it's him and me." There are larger issues. I think for myself: What kind of a legacy do I want to leave that's bigger, that would drive me back in to having the energy again to make it work? Where do I want my kids to go as they grow up? What do I want them to be like as they grow up? Do I . . . and if I'm a follower of Jesus Christ . . .

Mart: Okay so . . .

Joe: Do I want to be . . . hang on just a minute, you know, do I want to be a man of God? Is that an ultimate dream in my life to be someone whom God would say: That Joe's my kind of man? All I'm saying is sometimes I think there are larger issues that motivate us back in because we've lost our motivation in the relationship, because she's not what I thought she would be or he's not what I thought he would be.

Mart: So you're tapping then into my faith. Let's say that I'm . . . you're assuming then that I'm a man who has a faith. Okay, and I

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want to be a follower of Christ.

Joe: And some fundamental desirables.

Mart: So you're bringing the resources, then, of the Scriptures and my relationship with God. You're calling me to something bigger than myself. How do you feel, Joe, say if you're representing a pastoral point of view, how do you feel about how Larry's pressing me right now?

Joe: Well, I think Larry's doing the right thing, you know, what do you . . . I think what I hear Larry doing is calling out from inside of you, you know, what are you . . . what do you want really at the end of the day out of life, you know? Do you want brokenness, or do you want healing?

Larry: And because of the frustration and pain and futility that you feel in the way you were role-playing, I would want to be very, very gentle. I know in our little interaction it was boom, boom, boom, boom. But I would want to be profoundly gentle. I would want to say that somewhere as you've lost all this hope, I would love to . . . the idea—what legacy: your kids, who God is, what you want to be—I think that's crucial. I can draw out the motivation as Joe is saying. I would also want to, in talking to you, and I'm thinking of a particular gentleman now, I would want to understand the level of terror in that guy's soul based on his background that justifies his retreating from his wife. "You

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don't know the pain that I feel when I move toward my wife, trying to be this wonderful husband you're talking about, and it just bombs every time. She just is such a angry woman that no matter what I try she finds something to find fault with. And then I just quit, and I'm so angry." But anger's not his fundamental emotion. I don't believe anger is ever a primary emotion. I think fear is far more primary. It's the first emotion mentioned in the Bible: "So I'm just terrified that I don't have the weightiness as a man, the resources to move into my wife. But, hey, I'm a good school teacher; hey, I'm a good physician; hey, I'm a good salesman, so I'm going to go there but when I move here . . ."

Mart: It doesn't work.

Larry: I'm up against with the terror of revealing my inadequacy as a man, and that's what keeps a guy from moving toward his wife. And that's what I'd want to get to in a very gentle way.

Mart: No that's good. That's good. So from a pastoral point of view representing the spiritual, you would pull me to something bigger than myself, and you would push deep.

Larry: Because that's just the spiritual, because that's not spiritual versus psychological. To me, to go inside is where the Bible tells us to go, because the spiritual battle is not fought only in my vision of what I could be; it's fought in the depravity that keeps me from handling my terror with faith in God. So the

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spiritual battle is what I'm getting into just as much as getting into the larger transcendent issues.

Joe: But see, in my mind the transcendent issues keep you in the game. That's my goal. It doesn't answer the internal struggles, but initially I just want to keep you in the game. I call Larry. "Hey, Larry, you know, let's . . . help me dig deep with this." And I think too there's another thing: We live in a world that's all about personal pleasure, but it's an imperfect world. It's a fallen world. We're all frail. And is there . . . does there come a point where I continue to hope, and I continue to pray. I continue to do my part, by the way which is an important thing. A lot of us are in this standoff world: "When he changes, I'll think about changing." I mean we have to take the personal initiative. Is there ever a point where we say, "I will endure. I will endure for the sake of my kids"? I, you know, I've had people tell me: "I want to tell you about my mom." And then they tell me about the marriage and how broken it was, and the dad and what he was like. But they say, "You know, my mom was such a godly woman. And she just kept pouring into us and pouring into our home." You know, and I'm not asking, I don't think anybody should stay in an abusive situation. I'm not talking about those kinds of things, but sometimes you can build a legacy that makes an impact past yourself by saying, "I'm just going to, you know, stick with it and keep praying and keep hoping."

Mart: And wouldn't it be wonderful if our sons and our daughters could say that about us as men too.

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Joe: Yes, right. Exactly.

Larry: And just as often our sons and daughters will look at the mom and dad who have been wonderful godly examples, and it won't seem to make a bit of an impact. And that's just so frustrating. There's no formula here. There's no, you know, if the mom stays involved I think many times that has an incredible impact on the child, but oftentimes the impact either isn't there or it's not visible. I think the whole issue of a husband and wife getting together and raising kids is one of the most challenging, unpredictable places where prayer so often seems absolutely futile. I imagine some people are thinking right now, you know, "I'm a dad; I'm a mom, I've been praying like mad for years. Nothing's happened."

I can recall the pain. I don't think I've ever had more severe pain in my life, and I've had my share of pain all of us have—mother's Alzheimer's, my brother's death in a plane crash, my cancer—I've had things that have been hard. I think the hardest thing I've ever had to face, two things really, with my children: One was walking with my son into the courtroom when he had been arrested—and again I say this with his permission—and I remember saying to him angrily: "I don't ever want to ever be here again walking into a courtroom with you." And with language inappropriate to use, he said, "Well, then, you can just leave right now." It wasn't the best father/son moment we ever had, and I can say that the story has turned out well. But for some parents it doesn't turn out well. And nobody should

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ask me, “Well, what did you do to see that it turned out well?” because I don’t know. To me, it’s God. And I don’t understand Him very well. And the other significant time was when my other son went through a crisis where it was so severe; his pain was so deep that he didn’t have the courage to share with me the depths of his pain. And he told me a year after that he came very, very close to taking his life. Now when I hear that kind of stuff, I don’t know what to do. I’m confused. There are no formulas. I think I’ve been a godly parent with all the exceptions that everybody fails with, and my godly parenting hasn’t produced in those moments when I thought it would produce. And so what I’ve got to do is what Joe is saying, I’ve got to persevere in faithfulness to God. I’ve got to say, even when my best parenting doesn’t seem to work: Does that mean I stop my best parenting? Does that . . . okay, or am I really living for the pleasure of God? And that’s tough when you’re doing your best as a husband. Your wife doesn’t respond. You’re doing your best as a wife, the husband doesn’t respond. You’re doing your best as a mom or dad, your kids don’t respond. And you say, “This Christian stuff isn’t even working.” And then my response is: “I know it feels that way, and it really isn’t in the way you expected it to, back to the issue of expectations, but maybe the real purpose, maybe we can take seriously some old Christian clichés to live for the glory of God. You know, what a lovely cliché to say Sunday morning. What does it mean when your kid’s in jail? What does it mean when your husband’s having an affair? This is tough stuff, but that’s when you get down to the bedrock of what it means to be a Christian.

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