

A
Spiritual
Heritage

Connecting Kids and Grandkids
to God and Family

GLEN AND ELLEN SCHUKNECHT

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A Spiritual Heritage: Connecting Kids and Grandkids to God and Family
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Introduction

Cinnamon Rolls at Oma's

Ellen

I wake up before the sun rises to make cinnamon rolls. It's a low-key Saturday, so I have invited family over for a breakfast. They all live nearby, and it's a privilege to host them when it works for everyone's schedule.

I carefully measure yeast and sprinkle it into tepid water with a teaspoon of sugar. I pull the flour out of the pantry, eyeing the canister to see if there is enough for a triple batch. Last time, my ten-year-old grandson asked for more as he scraped leftover gooey cinnamon off the bottom of the pan, so I quickly add more yeast and water, mentally calculating a triple portion of each ingredient.

As I roll out the dough onto my countertop, I pray for each of my three adult kids and their spouses, and then I pray for my grandkids. There are eleven of them—if you can believe it—ranging in age from one to ten. As I pray, the sun begins to rise over the hilltop, reds and oranges providing a backdrop for the bare-branched trees outside our house, which will soon be covered in blooms and leaves.

The clock reads 6:05 when I slide three white cloths over three large pans of cinnamon rolls so they can proof. By the time the dough begins to rise, my house will likely be full of giggling children and messy-haired adults asking for coffee. And so, I take a minute to relish the silence, the quiet of a still-sleepy morning.

I am not wrong. At 6:25, the first knock sounds at the door. It's my five-year-old grandson, Will, wearing football pajamas and blue flip-flops, his blond hair sticking out at all angles.

“Hi Oma!” He steps inside before I can invite him in, and hugs my legs. “Can I go wake up Opa?”

Will and his Opa have a special bond, and ever since Will earned the privilege of walking down to our house alone on Saturday mornings, my poor husband hasn't been able to sleep past seven o'clock.

But Glen doesn't mind. It's fun watching him be a grandfather. He was a great dad—the kind who played baseball in the yard and taught the kids to plant a perfect garden. But as a grandfather, he's incredible. My wide-eyed grandsons watch in awe as he goes about his day. They consider each of his daily tasks an heroic feat achievable only by the superhero that is their Grandpa. When he mows the lawn, the simple sound of the mower draws a gaggle of preschoolers, each waiting patiently for the chance to

ride a loop on his lap. And when he grills on the patio? Let's just say that my ten-year-old grandson, Joey, has figured out how to finagle a second dinner.

As Will trots off to Opa's room with plans to sneak up on him and scare him awake, I glance up the hill to see if any other tiny feet are walking toward my house in the morning sunshine. Sure enough, Will's siblings—Joey, mentioned above, and eight-year-old Kate—are heading down with their coats hastily thrown over their pajamas. On arrival they ask if I want to play a game of Parcheesi. I do, but I tell them I have to get breakfast ready first.

While I wait for the oven to preheat, I grind coffee beans. My son and his wife brought me a ten-pound bag of coffee from Ethiopia, where they finalized their adoption. The beans are rich and fragrant, and just smelling them makes me think of my precious grandson Isaac, and my heart jumps a little. He's just adorable—and while I know I am biased, he is, in my opinion, one of the smartest, spunkiest kids I've met. It's still hard to believe that he is ours.

The coffee is brewing, and the timer dings to signal that the oven is preheated. I slide the rolls in just as my son-in-law Peter, who lives next door, walks through the door with his three wily toddlers Asa, Alma, and Beth. The kids scream and start to run around the couch, chasing each other while throwing a tiny basketball back and forth. Peter steps in front of them and catches them in his wide arms. He sends them off to the back playroom to build Legos with Will.

I return to the kitchen and start scrambling eggs. Haddie, Peter's eldest joins Joey and Kate at the table and they begin an animated game of Parcheesi. Twenty minutes later, the timer dings, and little feet run into the kitchen. The smells of cinnamon and bacon draw everyone to the table. We crowd around, jostling each other as we fill paper plates with rolls and bacon, and as adults refill their coffee cups. The kids tear into cinnamon rolls with their hands, creating a sticky mess of my clean tabletop. It's messy and loud, frantic and chaotic—and joyful.

This crazy-busy, family-filled life of mine may seem a bit strange—out of the norm—and far from the quiet, retired-in-the-countryside life that many dream of for their later years. But for Glen and me, it is exactly what we have been praying for since our children were born. It's family and connection and love and God's mercy all rolled up into one messy package.

You see, I didn't have a close-knit, faith-filled family as a child. I had hard-working parents who put food on the table, but who rarely had time to talk to me or my siblings. As a child, I never had a true, deep, disciple-building connection with anyone. And I had no idea if connected family living was worthwhile or even possible.

But I knew I wanted something different for my kids' childhood. I wanted to break the cycle. I wanted to raise my kids so that they would leave my nest strong in their faith, ambitious in their dreams to better the world, and so connected to family that they would be irresistibly drawn back to the very place

where these foundations were formed. I want my family to have a spiritual heritage, to live connected, God-loving, and joyful lives.

I remember holding my eldest daughter Erin in the hospital after she was born. She was tightly wrapped in a hand-knit yellow afghan, and her tiny blue eyes were staring up at me. I prayed then that my daughter would grow up not only feeling cherished and loved by her family but also knowing that her God cherished and loved her more than she could even understand. I prayed that her faith would solidify, never waver, never falter, never dip. And that I would be able to form a connection with her that ran deep—honest, true, pure, and holy—a connection that would bring us both closer to Christ.

That prayer was definitely bold. Perhaps I asked for an impossibility, but I truly believe God desires that each of His children be lovingly connected with Himself and family. I believe all prayerful, God-seeking parents should pursue such high ideals with passion and grace as we raise our kids.

That's what this book is about—not how to become a perfect mom or dad or grandma all wrapped up with a pretty red bow, but instead how to raise kids who willingly and capably speak up for their faith, who live sanctified lives, who stand against a world that is anything but God-seeking, and who maintain a healthy, loving connection with family that endures well past high school into adulthood.

I want to be clear right up front—there is no formula. I can no more guarantee that your kids will follow God and stay connected to you than I can guarantee you will take your next breath. I won't give you a list of things you must do or should do, or even can't do. Instead, I'll give you a collection of ideas and advice from Glen and me and parents like us who have raised their kids and desperately want to show the next generation what a Christian heritage is. And I'll describe how you, in turn, can raise the next generation of Christian warriors, ready to do battle against a world that seems more desperate every day.

That's not to say my life has been perfect—there have been plenty of angry conversations and tearful prayers—times when I've wondered what went wrong. But there has also been much sharing of hearts over cups of coffee, and much time on my knees in prayer, and much forgiveness from everyone.

So it is that now I live within a few miles of all of my kids and grandkids and spend most Saturday mornings eating cinnamon rolls and drinking coffee around my crayon-covered kitchen table. Life is sweet—wild, messy, and sweet.

I pray that the words in this book will find you in similar circumstances twenty years from now—circumstances reachable through years of trial and error, and prayer—with strong families, beautiful marriages, and bright-eyed, Jesus-seeking kids.

And a kitchen that smells like cinnamon and has sticky handprints all over the table.

PART ONE

Creating an Atmosphere for Spiritual Heritage

Chapter 1

The Generation Connection

Glen and Ellen

Something was wrong with Sophie.

Her mom, Natalie, sensed this deep inside. Sophie had changed since starting eleventh grade. She had become sullen and secretive, and refused to make eye contact. Natalie wondered if her daughter's behavior was caused by a bad influence in her new circle of friends? Or if it was an immature response to the independence that came with being able to drive? Natalie felt that Sophie's character had altered so much that she was no longer the young woman she had been raised to be.

Words jumped out from Facebook as Natalie passed by Sophie's open laptop lying on the dining room table. Worry compelled Natalie to continue reading the thread, overriding the guilt she felt in breaching her teen daughter's privacy. Sophie hadn't even logged off Facebook or tried to hide the evidence. It was almost as if she wanted her mom to see what she was doing, a subconscious plea for help, hope that someone would grab her hand and drag her out of the mire before she sank too deep.

Natalie gripped the chair tightly and held back tears as the truth glared at her from the computer screen. Sophie had been sneaking out at night. And it was no longer just to visit friends or catch a movie, as she had done one Friday night of her sophomore year. No, Sophie had gotten involved in much worse mischief that.

"Our family Christmas trip will be such a drag. Nothing fun will happen at all," she had written. "At least you know how to have fun. I'll see you at Sam's on Saturday. As long as I can drag myself out of bed for church on Sunday, my parents will never know. I'll bring the weed. Don't forget to bring condoms. Wink, wink."

Natalie didn't want to read more, but she knew she had to if she was going to help Sophie. So she scrolled down. What came next broke her heart into a thousand pieces. There were messages about sex and parties and sneaking around written to and from Sophie's new boyfriend, Todd, whom Natalie had met only once, messages written to new friends who seemed to be nothing like her daughter's old friends, and messages with words that Natalie had hoped Sophie didn't even know, much less use.

Within minutes, it became clear that her daughter—the girl who had made a vow to remain pure just the year before—was not only having sex but was also drinking and experimenting with drugs. And she no longer wanted anything to do with God or the lifestyle she had been trained in.

How could Sophie's life have changed so much in just a few short months? And how could Natalie help her daughter who had walked so far away from how they had raised her? This story is, admittedly, a

parent's worst nightmare, and there is no magic wand that will prevent your child from rebelling, but it is possible to raise kids who stay strong in their faith—kids who choose right, who stay connected, who love deeply, and who passionately pursue God. Yes, it is possible even in this topsy-turvy world where right and wrong are often difficult to define.

While God's plan for your kids is just that—God's plan—he often uses parents and their influence to build a spiritual heritage. He often uses parents who maintain a relationship with their kids far into adulthood that is connected, God-centered, and future-seeking.

Does that mean Sophie's parents have no hope? Absolutely not. God can redeem anyone. He holds our children in the palm of His hand, and we can trust Him to hold them tightly and to pull them back to Him even when hope seems futile. The truly incredible thing is that many of the principles we'll show you to help prevent rebellion can also entice your children back to God.

So we want this book to serve as both inspiration and hope, as both help and encouragement, and as a way for you to see your family in a new light: as making a slow, prayer-fueled journey to a beautiful, God-centered heritage. A journey that, yes, will have many bumps and bruises along the way, but a journey that, in the end, will be remembered as a beautiful trek toward God's promise.

What *Heritage* Means

We are big believers in heritage. Especially spiritual heritage.

Perhaps it's because I (Ellen) didn't grow up in a household with a spiritual heritage. Sure, I had a heritage—a Finnish one—from which I learned the value of hard work and determination, and of curiosity and innovation. It was in our DNA as a Finnish family.

Yes, I had a heritage, but I did not have a *spiritual* heritage. My parents were more focused on their own lives and work than they were on raising kids to love God and live virtuous lives. I remember longing for more, and even vowing that I would give my kids more, but never knowing exactly how to make that happen.

Glen, on the other hand, was raised with a strong Christian heritage. His staunch German Baptist parents weren't perfect, but they understood heritage. They had morning devotionals around the breakfast table (his mom made bacon *and* sausage every morning), they had Christmas tree hunts as a family, they swam in the local swimming hole every summer. They prayed together. They played together. They were together.

His parents certainly got it. A spiritual heritage is difficult to describe succinctly but intuitive to understand. Creating a place where beliefs are handed down, a home in which children are viewed as a heritage of the Lord, makes sense to some people. Others have to fight for it but also manage to understand it.

Heritage is connectedness.

It's vision.

It's the courage to stand up for what you believe in as a family.

It's the ability to say no to busyness and yes to tradition.

It's hope in Christ.

It's interdependency.

It's individualism defined within the context of family.

It's the result of much prayer.

It's love personified.

It's a capacity and willingness to forgive.

It's a choice to be a family that blesses others.

It's everything that God says in the Bible about family and parenting all thrown together into a messy, love-filled household.

And it's a key to raising kids who still stay connected both to God and to family once they are out in the big, wide world. Notice we didn't say *the* key—it's not an absolute requirement for raising God-centered, connected kids. But it is *a* key. Parents who focus on developing a heritage with a strong spiritual component when their kids are being raised are giving their kids the tools they need to stay strong once they leave.

And it's important. But it's also really hard to do.

The description of a spiritual heritage goes way beyond what we can say in this book, but we pray that this book will at least help you start building your family's heritage. We hope it will be a volume that you will refer back to for ideas, tips, thought-starters, and models for prayer.

Before we move on, let us confirm that in twenty years, you will, in fact, look back and regret some missed opportunities. Hindsight has 20/20 vision, and you will certainly think of ways you could have done things better. And this isn't a bad thing!

We firmly believe that not only will you likely get a second chance as grandparents, but it is downright impossible to make an unforgivable mistake that will destroy your family's heritage. God the Father just doesn't operate in the realm of unforgivable mistakes. You can't miss a step, miss your cue, have a bad day, and throw it all away. Instead, heritage is a twisting-turning journey with a path that goes through mountains and valleys and down the sides of ravines. One day you will be walking in a beautiful meadow, and the next day you'll be falling off a cliff.

But that doesn't mean you have failed. And it doesn't mean your kids are destined for failure. Quite the opposite. Those cliff-falling days (like the one Natalie had at the beginning of this chapter) are just

reminders for us to buckle down and prayerfully trudge on, to keep building and defining a heritage for our families.

It's never too late. God loves you. He loves your kids. And He wants to give your family a spiritual heritage that will last for generations.

Start Your Family's Spiritual Heritage

Starting is easy.

Just turn to God—right here, right now—and say, Lord, I want to be a heritage builder for my kids. I want them to value and remember special times we share as a family and practices we adhere to that unite our hearts and minds. But more than that, I want my kids to yearn for you so eagerly that they will be able to resist every temptation that the world would put before them. I want them to be so connected to me and to our family that they know they can turn to us with anything—any burden, any problem, any hope, any dream. I want them to love fully, to understand deeply, to connect wholly, and to seek you with every part of their beings. I want to give them a spiritual heritage that will grow and flourish for generations.

That was easy, right?

Now comes the hard part: you have to make cinnamon rolls—from scratch. We're kidding. (But we did put our recipe at the end of this book, if you are dying to try them. They are ooey, gooey delicious.)

In the coming chapters, we'll look at the next steps. The stories we've collected there are a little more rubber-meets-the-road. But without prayer, nothing else matters. So, seriously, go forth and prayerfully make a heritage for your family, because family is at the center of God's design and purpose.

And whether you have toddlers or teenagers or even college kids like Sophie who have already drifted away, it's not too late. You can do this. And God will help you leave a heritage that will reach your kids, your grandkids, and future descendants.

Quick Tips for Establishing a Spiritual Heritage

1. Share with your children and grandchildren your own journey of faith. Describe both the up times and the down times. Tell them of both the good and the bad decisions you made, as well as the outcomes of each.
2. Verbalize for each child individually your vision of them loving the Lord and serving Him with purpose.
3. Tell them of individuals who were inspirational to you and how they helped you grow.

4. Celebrate Christian holidays joyfully and reverently. Build traditions that help your kids and grandkids remember these holidays in special ways.
5. Read the Bible together as a family. Talk through the readings and apply them to your family's relationship with God and with each other.
6. Go on a mission trip together. By taking care of the spiritual and physical needs of others, you will strengthen your own family.
7. Make it a stated family aim to be a blessing to other families. Then put it into practice by scheduling times to serve those in need together as a family.
8. A spiritual heritage includes the past as well as the present and future. Help your kids and grandkids to understand where they came from. Share with them the history of their family.

In the very beginning, God called on Adam and Eve “to leave” and “cleave” (see Gen. 2:24) and “to be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 9:7). This directive doesn't apply just in the physical sense—although it certainly means that God calls us to form physical families. God was also calling upon Adam and Eve and all future families to multiply their spiritual heritage. Family is where children are most apt to learn what it means to be a citizen of God's kingdom and as such how to bless and serve the world around them. And family is the place where your children will learn what it means to be a child of God. That is why spiritual heritage is so important. And why we as parents and grandparents and even great-grandparents must intentionally and prayerfully build families that offer children a glimpse into God's own heart.