

Chapter Two

GENERATIONAL MOMENTUM

Do not bow down to any idol or worship it, because I am the Lord your God and I tolerate no rivals. I bring punishment on those who hate me and on their descendants down to the third and fourth generation. But I show my love to thousands of generations of those who love me and obey my laws (Exodus 20:5, 6, GNT).

I love to golf. Well, usually. No golfer has a purely romantic relationship with the game. It can be cruel and unfair. There are times when I play that I can do everything right, strike the ball perfectly, and look up only to see the one overhanging branch no more than two inches thick knock it sideways into the water on the other side of the fairway.

I have played the game most of my life. That, itself, is a minor miracle because most of those years I had very little reason to love the game. You see, the vast majority of those years, I suffered from the bane of amateur golfers everywhere: the slice. Mine was legendary. I got used to watching that wild curve to the right and climbing through weeds and woods in search of errant shots. Occasionally I would ac-

tually get to hit a ball from the fairway, but rarely was it the fairway of the hole I was playing! Still, I played. I suppose there were just enough good shots to keep me going, and when they did happen, I really had no idea why. And I certainly didn't know how to repeat that rare shot. Believe me, I tried to figure it out. I always had plenty of advice, and since I was so desperate to figure it out, I was eager to try just about anything. This elbow in, that wrist out, one leg forward, one leg back, back swing here, follow through there . . . grip adjustments, stance adjustments, aim adjustments. None of it mattered. In essence, I was trying a whole bunch of different things—and changing nothing.

There is an old saying I'm sure you've heard: insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Which is exactly what I was doing. For years. Each new round started with the promise of deliverance from my torment. And each round would end with the same despair. Even though I thought I was trying different things, the truth is that none of it changed things where they mattered. So the slice never went away. Until . . . I finally came to the conclusion that I needed help. And not from the other amateurs from whom I'd been getting advice. No, I realized the kind of help I needed was from someone who could actually help me understand exactly what was faulty about my swing and teach me how to correct it.

Guess what? It worked! I finally found an instructor who could do those things for me. For the first time in my life, I truly did understand what caused my problems and, therefore, how to fix them. Now, years of repetition of doing the wrong thing doesn't just disappear overnight. I would hit many more slices. But the difference was I knew what caused those wayward shots and what I needed to do to fix them. Finally, after years of going nowhere, I slowly began to get better. Oh, I'm still very much an amateur. But when I play now, I have far more good shots than bad.

The turning point was the moment I finally decided I needed help, and I sought that help from someone who could actually offer it.

What does this have to do with fatherhood? Great question. Bear with me; I'll get right back to that. First, let me share another story. This one is fiction, but the truths explored in the story are hardly fictional. Years ago, Disney made a movie, starring Bruce Willis, called *The Kid*. It is the story of Russell Duritz, a driven, shallow, narcissistic man who has built a successful career as an image consultant for high-powered entertainment, political, and journalism professionals. But for all his success professionally, he is an abject failure as a human being. He is cruel, selfish, impatient, and . . . alone. Surprisingly, his rescue comes in the form of his 8-year-old self—on his 40th birthday. The young Russ and the adult Russ find themselves brought together in a cosmic twist. And through that encounter, adult Russ is forced to understand his past and how key moments in his young life set him on a path to become the man he became.

That is the backdrop to what, for me, is the most impactful scene of the movie. As the story unfolds, we learn Russ's story and about one moment, in particular, that cemented his course. As an 8-year-old, Russ is a paunchy, awkward kid who gets picked on at school and is largely ignored by his dad. On one fateful day at school, he got in trouble with one of his tormentors. His mom took the call and made her way to school to pick up Russ. The scene picks up with Russ and his mom having just arrived home. They are still standing on the front walkway as Russell's dad gets home. His dad quickly rushes to usher his wife indoors and, a short time later, emerges again through the front door in a rage. His words are like daggers to a young boy's heart as he berates his son for causing so much trouble. They are devastating: "Are you trying to kill her faster?" In that moment Russell learns for the first time that his mother is dying and, of course, he begins to cry. Again, his father strikes another withering blow to his young son as he wipes his tears and commands him to stop crying . . . now. He finishes the moment with one more dagger as he walks away, saying, "Grow up."

In the first chapter I briefly described a day when God used my friend's piercing words to shake me up. A journey began to find healing for a heart I knew was in desperate need of care. A big part of that healing came as I began to understand the importance of exploring my past so that I could, like Russ Duritz, understand key moments that were impacting who I had become. For the first time in my life, I really started to look deeply into the ways I had been wounded and the things I came to believe because of those wounds. For me, this hit me doubly hard as a man who had been reawakened to his divine responsibility of fatherhood. I was, for the first time, coming to terms with my own past, especially wounds born of my relationship with my own dad. At the same time I was confronting, for the first time, the devastating thought that I was wounding my own children. Frankly, it all felt overwhelming. Was it inevitable that I would continue a legacy of wounding from father to son, father to daughter? Was it inevitable that my fatherhood journey was going to be a story of failure and regret? At the time, that thought scared me—deeply. It was the deepening of a heart cry that had started to grow before but, in that moment, became desperate. My children were still young, so, I thought to myself, *At least I have a chance at a different story.* And it was a story I now wanted very badly to be different.

Here again, I have to pause. I'm afraid that if I don't say more, there is way too much room for shame and misunderstanding that could steal from what I most want to share. If I say nothing more, too many men, including my own dad, would rightly conclude that this is, in fact, a critique on their failures. But I bring up the difficult topic of father wounds not to lash out at my father or yours. The reality is that no one is perfect. All of us dads have failed our kids. So, no, this is not a shaming over our failures. After all, we're all in the same boat. But that doesn't mean we should ignore those failures either, because there is an impact, and it is more significant than you may realize. There is a ripple effect of our failures that carries from generation to generation.

Yes, in my own journey into these heart issues, the healing and restoration I have enjoyed simply could not have happened without a clear-eyed look at some moments that had a profound and lasting impact on my heart and life. That journey did open the door to some extremely deep emotions, some that would last for years. Yes, my dad wounded me. I hate that he may be one of many men to read this. No father enjoys hearing that. And this son does not enjoy saying it. I don't like the thought that this topic is hurting him. I love him, respect him, and am so grateful for so many wonderful things he offered me as well. But here's the thing: there is no sugarcoating or ignoring that he did also wound me, and I simply could not have had the healing my heart so desperately needed without taking Jesus' invitation to go into those moments, understand them, and allow him to heal them.

There are things we were made to need and want from our dads. This is such a painful—and for some, taboo—subject because the reality is, each and every one of us has experienced this. We didn't get what we needed. For some of you, wounds of abuse, abandonment, or adultery (among other things) have been obvious, and devastating. For others, the wounds are maybe less obvious, but the impact to your heart and story are also profoundly significant and never should be minimized. For some, to go back into your story feels too overwhelming and painful, and for many of us, it feels dishonoring to admit the wounding, much less walk deeply into it. I could have simply gone on with my life ignoring the truth of moments that my dad failed me. Maybe, in some ways, that would have been easier—in the short term, anyway. But I also never would have come to the gift that is wrapped within that pain: the compassion of a God who grieves with us over what our fathers failed to give, and an invitation for us to let him be all that our earthly father was not. And, maybe most importantly of all, to begin to see God more and more as he is, independent of my earthly father.

One thing that has been so helpful for me in all of this is some perspective. Here is the thing about my dad and yours. His dad hurt him. And how about his dad? Yep, broken. It doesn't take long to see a much bigger picture. Fatherhood has been a broken institution all the way back to Adam. Men, we've all been swept up in it: a generational momentum of broken fatherhood. That is not a truth intended to minimize or dismiss your individual experience. It has helped me, though, realize just how desperate we all are for rescue.

And that is the very thing Jesus is inviting us to receive every day.

Which is exactly what the passage from Exodus atop this chapter alludes to. I know the language of those verses is, well, hard. "Tolerate no rivals"? Bring "punishment on those who hate me"? "To the third and fourth generation"? Those are some rather intimidating words, and they raise some tough questions. Perhaps the most difficult question for me is the idea that children are "punished" for the way their parents (ancestors) missed the mark. That just doesn't seem right and, honestly, feels petty. Which, I think, is a clue that perhaps we should keep working to understand. Are there other parts of Scripture that talk about ancestors, sin, and punishment? As it turns out, yes. Let's look at one:

A son is not to suffer because of his father's sins, nor a father because of the sins of his son (Ezekiel 18:20, GNT).

Okay. So this seems a direct contradiction of what God says in Exodus. Curious. But let's keep exploring. Perhaps this exchange between Jesus and his disciples will tell us more:

Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?" Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame.

There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do” (John 9:1-5, The Message).

The question the disciples ask is revealing. They saw the blind man’s condition and immediately assumed it was punishment for sin. As God’s word in Exodus would seem to indicate, the disciples concluded that the man’s blindness was a punishment from God either for the man’s sin or that of his parents. But Jesus blew up that premise. Sometimes there is cause and effect, and there are consequences directly related to our failures. But in this instance, Jesus reveals that things are far more complicated. We want to blame. Instead, Jesus says, “Look for what God can do.” With that in mind, let’s look again at Exodus.

God does say he will bring punishment on those who hate him—and on those within that line down to the third and fourth generation. But he says more. He says he will show love to thousands of generations of those who love and obey him. So let’s take Jesus at his word and, instead, look for what God is telling us about what he is doing. Could it be that the primary concern is not so much about punishment and reward as it is the issue of hating and loving? Specifically, the hate and love of concern here is our hate or love of God. To hate God is to choose disobedience—a rival, an alternative way of living outside of his design for us. And that design is to live out of intimate connection with and trust in him. To love God is to choose his way and his design for us and, yes, there are consequences for these options. The punishment, then, is God simply allowing the natural consequences of choosing our own way to unfold. Those consequences are not insignificant. There are some consequences that have a ripple effect from generation to generation. As long as the “hating of God” continues, so does the ripple effect.

This is the issue of generational momentum.

Doesn’t that ring true? Look at the ugliness of human brokenness: divorce, murder, addiction, abuse, passivity, bigotry, callousness, de-

pression, entitlement—and observe how these issues perpetuate from generation to generation. Our attempts to “fix” these problems are, frankly, no different than my feeble attempts to follow all the free advice I received to “fix” my very bad golf slice. All of it amounted to nothing more than superficial changes that never came close to helping me truly understand the problem and actually fix it.

Men, when it comes to fatherhood, I hope you are beginning to see what we are all up against. There is a generational momentum that has been sweeping all of us along.

Frankly, we’ve all been more or less taking stabs in the dark . . . making our best guesses . . . when it comes to fatherhood. Like all the “advice” I would get for my golf swing, we’ve been trying a whole bunch of stuff but never really understanding what has been broken or how to fix it. Really, men, what is—or has been—your plan for fatherhood? Let me take a crack at it. You started with the things you liked about your childhood (if there was anything) and kept those things. Then you determined the things you didn’t like and vowed to eliminate those things. *Voilà!* A plan. I know, I know. That sounds harsh. Once again, though, I do not offer this observation in shame. The reality is: what else were we going to do? It’s not like other options and resources were abundant—at least that we knew of. You didn’t know a better way because your dad never taught you . . . and his dad never taught him . . . and so on. So, again, I can totally relate to the dilemma because that is exactly where I was before encountering the movie scene with Russ Duritz.

Let’s go back to the rest of what God had to say in Exodus. Namely, he is eager to abundantly and lavishly pour out his love—to a thousand generations of those who love him or, put another way, choose him and his ways. Wow! He just cannot wait for us to get to the point where we realize how feeble and consequential “our way” has been and awaken to our desire to learn his design for living, for fatherhood. This is not a petty, vengeful Father. No, this is a Father who loves his

children deeply and wants the best for us. Even if we must learn that for ourselves the hard way.

My story had come to a turning point. I was finally ready to admit I needed help. I could see that my “plan” was only going to perpetuate the unredeemed brokenness and wounding from my childhood—and that my dad had experienced in his. I needed to go to someone who could help me understand fatherhood as it was intended and, not only that, learn how to bring that type of loving leadership to my family.

It is one thing to learn the proper technique of a golf swing; there are many good coaches and teachers out there. Fathering, though? Well, there was only one place I was going to go for that: the author of fatherhood himself. So now my whole being turned desperately to him. I had been awakened to my sacred role, and now I could see clearly what I was up against. No longer was I content to be swept along in generational momentum. So I drove a stake in the ground and decided it was time for me to take a stand against the current. I wanted to understand God’s design for fatherhood. My heart was crying out to God for clarity and an eager, desperate search began. For well more than a year, God let me sit with that desperation. I read, prayed, studied, and listened. A lot. What I didn’t know then, but clearly understand now, is his wisdom in making me wait—and work.

For the first time in my life I was learning to be fathered as a beloved son. I now know this fundamental truth to be the cornerstone for everything else I would learn. The day would come when he would answer my prayer. But it was something I needed to grow into. I wanted to offer all I could to my kids and family. But I simply would not be able to give what I didn’t have. So first I had to learn what it was to be fathered. To begin living, for the first time, as God’s beloved son. From there I would learn how to father my children.

So, men, you too are invited to take a stand and drive a stake in the ground. This issue of generational momentum has been impacting all of us, and wrapped in your story are very specific ways things have played out from generation to generation in your family. Perhaps you

never knew affection with your dad. I'm betting it's hard for you to be affectionate with your children. Maybe your dad made it clear that emotions and manhood don't go together. Chances are your children are now learning that from you. Maybe your dad was distant and passive. It's likely you are too. Perhaps you grew up in a broken family. I'm betting several of those issues are at work in your family. Or, for some of you, generational momentum has been generated through your determination to not be like your dad. He was passive; you are involved, but also unaware of how that might still be wounding to your kids. He was a disciplinarian; you rarely correct and discipline your kids. The point is that without truly understanding, our "best guesses" never get to the core issues. We're trying everything, understanding nothing, and, therefore, still hitting that bad "slice." I'll say it again because it is so important: none of this is offered in the spirit of condemnation. Instead, I hope you see it as an invitation. Not mine. God's.

"Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28, GNT).

"Come to me." Jesus is offering each of us an invitation. There is hope in the face of generational momentum. There is a design for fatherhood. You can learn it, and you can bring it to your family. It will not necessarily be easy. And, to be clear, I am not trying to imply that this is a path to perfect fatherhood. Far from it. It has been well more than a decade since I drove that stake in the ground, but I have not been spared failure and wounding. I am a man, like you, who is broken and imperfect and, like any other man, I have moments in which I fail and hurt my children. But as I've grown and learned how to live into God's design, the result has been that grace, understanding, redemption, love, and joy have all grown out of my weakness and brokenness—things I know God wants every father to experience with his family. Yes, I've hurt my kids. But some of my most cherished moments with them are when we've grieved those failures together,

picked each other up, dusted each other off, and continued walking together with God into the promise of fatherhood.

Driving a stake in the ground against generational momentum, turning away from your “best guess” plan for fatherhood and toward God’s design . . . these steps will not magically change things for you and your family overnight. Instead, like fixing a slice, they are the *beginning* of a process of unlearning and relearning. It will take courage, persistence, and perseverance. It will be opposed and, maybe, at times, it will feel like nothing’s happening. But with time you will begin to realize for yourself and your family the promise of fatherhood.

And “thousands of generations” will never be the same.

Next: Standing against the current of generational momentum is taking a stand against the current of your own family history—but it is also taking a cultural stand.