



THE
INTENTIONAL DAD

EMBRACE AND FULFILL THE
PROMISE OF FATHERHOOD

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ARIC MANLY



Carpenter's Son Publishing

The Intentional Dad: Embrace and Fulfill the Promise of Fatherhood

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Foreword

Ben Manly

GROWING UP AS THE SON OF AN INTENTIONAL DAD

The other day I stumbled across a documentary titled *Dads*. It was a fantastic film celebrating men who have embraced the role of fatherhood. There was one question, however, that was presented to all the dads that caught my attention. They were all asked to finish the sentence: “A father is _____.”

It’s a challenging question! And it got me thinking about how I would answer it based on the vision of fatherhood that my dad has to share with you. I can’t offer any firsthand experience for what fatherhood is like. What I can offer is insight into how a child might view their father, and what they need from him as they grow up. Which I think will be just as valuable.

* * *

I remember my days as a young boy being filled with bike rides around the neighborhood, construction of extravagant Thomas the Train tracks, and intense Nerf gun battles. And these things were al-

ways done with my “daddy.” At that age, he was my playmate. All I wanted to do was play with him every day because my father was the one person in the world I wanted to be with most. Everything was made better when “Daddy” was part of it.

Once I entered elementary school, my definition of a father expanded. I had friends at school now that I could interact with to feed my desire for play. I still had a deep desire to play with my dad, but my heart needed something new from him as well. I needed to know that I was welcomed by him and that he wanted me to join him in his adventures. He and my uncles had several activities that I was now being invited into. I started to play golf with him. And, most importantly, he invited me into an epic journey toward my initiation.

The invitation he offered me is the crux of this book. It has been the single biggest factor in shaping my relationship with him and with my Abba. At such a young age I did not fully understand the importance of this invitation, but I leapt at the opportunity because he had chosen me.

What followed was a ten-year journey of spiritual development that taught me and my dad so much about ourselves, each other, and God. Sometimes we were on top of the world and sometimes we were at rock bottom. But we did it all together. At first, the journey was mostly about learning through observation and conversation with my dad. As time went on, my adventure became more demanding as I learned to take a more active role in my own growth and development. But I’m getting ahead of myself. At age 8 my scope of the world was still very small. My father was simply the most important person in the world, and he had invited me into an adventure with him. I could not feel more special.

* * *

As I entered my adolescent years, a new desire for my own adventures grew. I needed to test my limits and discover for myself the strength and courage I possessed. I remember family vacations to na-

tional parks and longing to explore the beauty that lay beyond the beaten path. I felt this pull toward the untamed in other areas during this phase too (sports, academics, getting a driver's license, talking to girls). All of it was important in discovering my capabilities as an adolescent.

The most fascinating thing for me during this stage, however, was watching how my peers approached this need at the same time. Most tested their capabilities, primarily by pushing away their parents. But I got the sense they were doing that out of bitterness instead of a healthy desire for independence. Many kids seemed to believe that wanting a close relationship with their parents was weak or immature. It was a lonely feeling knowing that I did want to be close with mine.

Knowing how a relationship between father and son was meant to be, it was hard for me to understand. My dad and I were able to avoid that unresolved strain in our relationship because we were committed to understanding ourselves and each other. In this phase of our journey, while I was testing my limits and capabilities, I needed my father to be my cheerleader. And he was my biggest fan.

As my initiation into manhood drew closer, we both knew my dad needed to gradually "let go of the seat," much like a dad teaching a kid to ride a bike for the first time. As he released me into the loving arms of the Father, his teaching, coaching, and guidance gradually gave way to cheering me on as I began to take all I had been learning and make it my own.

The process of initiation helped give me a deeply secure sense of identity and taught me how to have a deep, intimate relationship with my heavenly Father. I never had to wonder who I was as an adolescent because my dad worked hard to make the answer quite simple and relevant for me. I was a beloved son. Nothing more, nothing less. The longer I've walked this path, the more I understand that this was, and always has been, the greatest thing I could be. If my earthly father could confirm that identity in me, how much more could I receive it from my heavenly Father!

* * *

Now I am officially an adult, and a new phase of our relationship is emerging. I still deeply value my dad's company and advice. And I will always need him in the ways I have before. But now I can feel my heart needing something new from him again. Now I am beginning to see my father more and more as my *friend* . . . the way a friend should be. Someone who is willing to give tough love when I need it and a warm embrace just as willingly.

Parents say their kids grow up fast; I can believe that we do. Our relationship has grown and changed immensely over the years, and it hasn't always been the easiest to navigate. But we have always done it together. Through the causes for celebrations, times of sorrow, and everything between, we have savored it all as father and son.

* * *

I am so proud, then, to invite you to receive the clarity and insight my dad has gained through his experiences. I know what it meant to me growing up. I believe you and your family will also be blessed as you experience the joy of intentional fatherhood for yourselves.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Let me start with a simple and heartfelt welcome. The fact that you have picked up a book called *The Intentional Dad* already says something about you. You are a man who is aware of his divine responsibility to his family, and you have a deep desire to lead your family well. In the pages ahead I share my fatherhood story with the hope that it will be an encouragement for you and your own fatherhood journey. Before turning to Chapter 1, I invite you to read the prologue, which is an invitation to moms. I wrote this book from one man to another, but the story I offer and invite you to discover for your family is one designed to be shared.

In my invitation to moms I explain the heart behind the story I share in this book, and this is an invitation I hope you come back to after you've finished. I share this at the start of the book to help men understand the backdrop for what I write before diving into the main part of the book. I also share this invitation at the beginning hoping it can support you, after you've finished reading, in communicating an invitation to the woman with whom you share this extraordinarily beautiful and sacred calling of parenthood.

I invite you into my heart behind my story—and then into the story itself. May God bless you and your family as you continue living out your sacred role as a father and husband.

Prologue

INVITATION TO MOMS

Let me start by simply saying thank you. You are a mom, and that is a sacred role, one to be honored and celebrated. It is challenging, tiring, and, many days, mundane and anonymous. So thank you for all you do every day to offer your tireless and sacrificial love to your kids and family.

Also, thank you for taking a few minutes to read this invitation. You are likely reading this because your husband asked you to. It may seem odd that he read (or is reading) a book titled *The Intentional Dad*, and now he wants to share it with you. If so, you are not the first to wonder what this may have to do with you.

The short answer is: a ton. Let me explain.

Yes, this book is written from one man to another as I share my story of healing and discovery with God and, specifically, how it has shaped my fatherhood journey with my kids and family. I am very aware that one of the unintended consequences of writing a book to dads is an understandable assumption from moms that it is not for them. I totally understand if you feel that way. So let me start there: I did write this book for your husband—but it was *not only* for him. What I share you will find extremely relevant for you, your family, and

your sacred role and calling as a mother. It has never been my heart to exclude mothers and the critical and irreplaceable role you play in the great calling of parenthood you share with your husband. Far from it. I can tell you from experience that my wife's partnership, wisdom, strength, and support has been essential to the intentional work of initiation I describe throughout this book.

More than a decade ago I began a journey with God to understand my sacred role and divine responsibility of fatherhood. What I learned gave birth to a vision for my family to lead our kids through a ten-year process of initiation. It was a vision for a direction into something new and unique—at least in our culture. My wife was extremely supportive from the beginning but, at first, it was difficult for her to fully understand. That was, well, completely understandable. There was nobody else doing what we were trying to do . . . nobody we knew, anyway. So the only way forward was to simply do our best to follow where God was leading. At first that meant my wife would mostly observe my interactions with our kids as I tried to follow God's lead into the things he was helping me learn and understand. With time, though, she also began to see, and understand, the journey God had for our family.

It took us some time to understand and sort out what it looked like to share in this vision together. But we did. And when she found her place and her voice, it was like rocket fuel. It was such an important moment for us, and the indescribable joy we have known as a family simply would not have happened without her heart, strength, and wisdom as a wife and mother in partnership with me. We have been, and continue to be, an inseparable team, and it is no less important for you and your husband.

So let me explain why I wrote this book to and for men.

There are three very important reasons. I'll say up front that the explanations I offer involve exploring some things that, for some women, are understandably sensitive issues. But I think you'll find that, even though they are potentially sensitive, what I have to say is not just another echo of what I believe to be tired and misguided perspec-

tives on women and marriage. I ask only that you give me patience, and hear me out.

The first reason I wrote this book is a straightforward one. I am a man and a father. The story I share is, specifically, my story of fatherhood: a story I offer to other dads. I offer my experiences to men because I know the challenges, fears, and desires we men, as fathers, feel for our kids and families. So, yes, I am, first and foremost, going to relate to and offer my experiences most directly to men.

The second reason is that fatherhood is a sacred office—and it is very opposed. Don't get me wrong, motherhood is sacred as well. But as a father I am passionate about the daily assault men experience on their masculinity and fatherhood and the consequences these cause. Again, I very much understand that women are not at all immune from opposition, and they also experience daily assaults on their femininity and motherhood. In pointing out the challenges men face I am in no way minimizing anybody's experiences. I am simply saying that, as a man, I am in a position to speak to the opposition men face and to offer something we rarely get: encouragement and hope.

Masculinity, and fatherhood, are viciously opposed, and the impact on men and their hearts is having a devastating effect on you and your kids. It really isn't a difficult thing to observe. Masculinity is increasingly seen as dangerous, predatory, domineering, and selfish. Rarely, if ever, are men celebrated as good, much less essential, to the well-being of their families and the world in general. The shaming is so prominent that many men, trying to find refuge, simply withdraw and disengage; they don't really know what else is left to do. The consequences of this trend aren't just to the men driven to disengagement and passivity. It adds to the assault you feel as a wife and mother as you bear more and more of the burden of caring for your kids and family. It is a horrible cycle that simply must, and can, be broken. It is a cycle that is broken through the encouragement, hope, understanding, and healing we all so desperately need. This is what I hope to offer in sharing my story with other men.

The third and most important reason lies in my desire to honor what I believe to be God’s design for marriage and parenthood. I am talking about God’s design for men to lead. Now, before you throw the book aside, please hear me when I say that I understand if you are skeptical or wary just at the very mention of these things. There is a ton of baggage here, and much harm has been done in the name of “honoring God’s word.” So I get that women—and rightfully so—have no tolerance for tired and demeaning “norms” that would have you believe Scripture is “clear” about gender roles in marriage—conveniently, “norms” that would have you sacrifice your dignity, strength, and individuality. I join you in rejecting such ideas.

Now, even with that said, I do believe it is part of God’s design for men to lead their families. So let me explain a bit more about what I believe to be a much more accurate understanding of the design God has provided, and I seek to honor.

All right. Time for a little theology.

Let’s start with the elephant in the room. The verse. Yep. That one.

*Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands
as you do to the Lord (Ephesians 5:22).*

There it is. That word. *Submit*.

Okay, we’ve said it. It’s on the table. That one verse has been so abused, misused, and, in my not so humble opinion, so badly misunderstood that it is very, very difficult to recover what I think to be one of the most beautiful and hopeful pictures in all of Scripture for what God intends for marriage. So I know it is a lot to ask for some women to take a closer look at something that has been so painful. I *am*, though, asking you to do just that. Something I find to be an extremely helpful exercise is the idea of “extracting the precious from the worthless.” This is an idea that comes from the words of the prophet Jeremiah. I explain it more in the book, but let’s take a short look here.

Let's start with that word, submit, itself. Often it's helpful to just go back to the clear definition. You will find this in Merriam-Webster:

*Submit (verb): accept or yield to a superior force
or to the authority of another person¹*

Taken by itself, it would seem that Paul is telling the Ephesian women to submit to their husbands as superior authority figures. But did you see the one bad word in that sentence? (Superior.) I think there are several reasons we can dismiss this idea. At the top of the list is the verse directly before Ephesians 5:22

*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ
(Ephesians 5:21; my emphasis added).*

That, well . . . changes things. Before he addresses the women, Paul talks to the men and the women *together*, telling them that God's design for marriage lies in submission—*equal submission*—to one another. In other words, in telling both men and women to submit to one another, he is pointing out what should be obvious: each, as a son or daughter of God, and made in His image, carries an inherent authority. The married life, then, is a mutual submission to and honoring of the inherent human dignity each carries as an image bearer of God. So with that one verse some misconceptions begin to clear up. The problem may not be with the idea of submission after all! The problem may be that, in misunderstanding the design of *mutual* submission, we have been fighting, resisting, and undermining something extraordinary.

Which leads me back to Merriam-Webster. This time, in the thesaurus, we find antonyms for the word submit like fight and resist.² In other words, maybe there's another, perhaps more subtle way of understanding submit: acceptance of what you had once been fighting and resisting.

Paul is writing to people who are trying to figure out what it means to live as followers of Jesus. They were unlearning old assumptions and relearning life by God's design (i.e., submitting to God—just as we are learning to do). As the unlearning and relearning turns to the topic of marriage, Paul starts with the idea of submission. Why? Because it is an incredibly powerful idea that, properly understood, would help them leave behind the demeaning and broken framework of marriage as they had been living it in their culture. Namely, we are talking about a first-century society in which men enjoyed social status, respect, and honor far beyond women. So for Paul to use the word *submit* was, actually, quite radical because he is telling his readers to turn from the old way—to stop resisting God's design and, instead, submit to one another as *equals*. That was a radical idea then—and it is no less revolutionary and hopeful for us today! What, then, does that submission look like?

More extracting is helpful here. First, yes, there is a yielding to authority, but not like we might be thinking. Paul challenges both men *and* women to stop resisting God's vision for marriage when he tells women to submit in the same way the church (read: men and women of God's family) submits to Christ. Yes, he specifically tells women to submit, but not in a one-sided, demeaning sacrifice of dignity. Instead, he tells them: submit in the same way you are learning to submit to Jesus' authority in your life. And knowing Jesus' true heart for us, we know that submitting to him is never a demeaning sacrifice of dignity. Quite the opposite. That, again, changes things.

The context for submission, then—what was radical and new—was the vision for what they were submitting to: “authority” as modeled by Christ. Specifically, that would be a model of sacrificial love that honors, serves, liberates, and *elevates a man's wife above himself*. Having given the women a new and hopeful picture for God's design, Paul turns to the men to explain God's design for them in marriage.

He gives them an incredibly lofty standard: to be a man who loves and leads his family in the same way Jesus loves and leads. To love and

honor her as Jesus loves and honors her. And how did Jesus love and honor her?

Yeah.

He died for her.

So it's not just that Paul was telling men to treat women as equals—he actually took it much further. He tells them God's design is for men to elevate their wives in word and deed above themselves—the same way Jesus loves us!

Putting it all together, then, an inspiring picture emerges—a beautiful dance of mutual respect, honor, and sacrificial love. A man offers his heart, his life, and his leadership in intentional, devoted, sacrificial love and service to his wife. A woman receives what her husband offers and, in so doing, breathes life into it as she offers her heart, life, and leadership in intentional, devoted, sacrificial love back to her husband. *He receives that life and honors his wife as he then offers the fruit of mutual submission and sacrificial love back to her.* It is life-giving, honoring, and stunningly beautiful—a dance God intends for you and your husband. A design to live in oneness and to thrive together.

This is the design I want to honor: God's design for your husband's masculine heart and his God-given desires to lead and love well as a husband and father. Our modern culture has, in many ways, swung in the opposite direction of that first-century culture. Shame, contempt, disdain, and mistrust are rampant and, for many men, have them retreating in disengagement and passivity. So, in honoring God's design, I want to offer encouragement, understanding, hope, and clarity that will help him find his strength again. A man's desire to lead is a God-given desire, and the world needs men to be restored to that desire. This starts with you and your family. He was made to lead, and the leadership he offers to you now is not characterized by what he wants *from* you but what he wants for you and your family. It is not characterized by *demand* but by *invitation*.

Which brings me back to what all this has to do with you.

In this book I share my story of fatherhood. I offer what I have learned and experienced through more than ten years of living out a journey of intentional fatherhood with my kids—and my wife. I do not have the words to adequately describe the joy we have known as a family, a joy I very much want for you, your husband, and your kids.

You have read this invitation, likely, because of your husband's desire to lead and love well. It is a desire he has been carrying with him—again, likely very quietly. He has known what he longs for but has struggled to truly understand what it looks like to embrace and fulfill his divine responsibility as a father and husband. He has longed for clarity and, for some time, done his best to love and lead without it. But that is changing.

This journey he has begun he now offers to you. The dance continues as you receive his invitation. I do not presume to have addressed everything that might be relevant to you as a woman, wife, and mother. But as you receive your husband's invitation, I believe you'll find this book to be extremely relevant, and precious, for you as well. You will begin a journey of healing and redemption of your own heart. As you do, together you and your husband will nurture a shared vision for embracing and fulfilling your sacred roles as parents.

So, yes, I wrote to your husband. But with each page of the manuscript, I had mothers like you very much in mind. The journey your husband is inviting you into is a journey meant for you to take together: an ongoing dance of offering and receiving the beauty, strength, wisdom, understanding, insight, personality, and gifting each of you has to offer. It is a fiercely intentional love that, together, in intimate partnership with God, you will offer to your kids.

From the beginning it has always been my hope that I could share my story with other men, that they could see and understand their calling to fatherhood, and, in doing so, invite their wives on a shared journey of intentional parenthood. It is an invitation I extend along-

side your husband, and one I offer in hopeful anticipation of what God has in store for you, your husband, and your family.

May God bless you and your family richly as you receive the invitation and continue the dance.

Chapter One

THE PROMISE OF FATHERHOOD

*Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him.
Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth.
Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them (Psalm 127:3-5).*

It was a stormy day in April. But the weather hardly mattered in that moment. In fact, almost nothing felt important compared to what I was witnessing and experiencing. It was surreal, magical, divine . . . sacred, really. My wife was giving birth to our first child. The moment was bathed in anticipation as, over nine months, she and I had been experiencing the awe of his development in the womb. Early on we had signed up for an email subscription that delivered to our inbox a weekly update on his approximate size (cleverly done by comparing his size, usually, with a vegetable—suddenly peas and lima beans became very very interesting items) and what parts of his body were developing. The words “fearfully and wonderfully made” and “knit together in my mother’s womb” took on an entirely new depth of significance. And with each passing day, the anticipation grew for the

day he would take his first breath and we could look into the eyes of this beautiful child.

Moments before, Mary Jo and I were playing Yahtzee to pass the time, but we never finished because she rather suddenly stopped playing . . . and talking . . . and moving. Only slow breathing. The rest is a blur. The team of doctors and nurses swept into action. At first I was at her side and we did that breathing thing we learned to do. But at some point, that was no longer necessary. My job was done, and all that was left for me was to watch it all unfold.

Time seemed to stop. The buzz around the room and the urgency of the medical team all seemed to go silent. Everything felt like it was in slow motion as I breathed in the divine moment. My son emerged and looked straight at me. I looked deeply into his eyes, mine full of tears, and simply said “Hi!” He blinked a couple times, and then came that beautiful sound as he breathed in to let out a small cry. I don’t know how I stayed on my feet. The best way I can describe that moment was that the veil between eternity and this world was pulled back and I had witnessed something divine. My wife and I loved this little boy long before he was born. But in that moment, something was awakened in me—and I would never be the same. As I looked into my son’s eyes, the weight of the moment struck me deeply as the anticipation of those nine months culminated in that precious moment . . . I was a dad. I had a divine responsibility to that little boy, and my desire to live up to that promise was fully alive. All at once, the promise of fatherhood was something hopeful, inspiring, beautiful—and terrifying.

I didn’t have a moment of sleep that first night as I held my son, literally, all night.

That was how my fatherhood journey began. Maybe you can relate to my experience or, quite possibly, the dawn of your fatherhood journey was nothing like mine. Some of you were there for the birth of your child, but “divine” is the last word you would use to describe the moment. Some of you weren’t in the room at all. Still others are fathers to children who are not flesh and blood but no less your sons and

daughters—through adoption, fostering, or as stepchildren. While the dawn of our fatherhood journeys may be unique (or perhaps yours has yet to begin), if you're reading this book it is highly likely we all have something in common. We all share a deep sense of the hopeful, inspiring, beautiful, and sacred role of fatherhood—as well as the fear connected to the divine responsibility we all feel for the children we love so deeply.

And really, do we need to make the case for the significance of fatherhood? We could just start with Solomon's words from Psalm 127. The man whose name is synonymous with wisdom calls children a "heritage" and "reward" meant as a blessing from God. And what man, including our heavenly Father, doesn't beam with joy as his children call out to him, "Daddy!" Fatherhood is from God. It is, in my not so humble opinion, the most important work he has ordained for men. Put simply, the world needs men to be fathers. It is clearly a significant part of God's design for the planet.

Instinctively, I think, most men know this. The world certainly knows this. Unfortunately, though, the world knows it more and more by the absence of fathers. The purpose of this book, however, is not to be another voice of shame for men. There are plenty of those voices—and none of them are at all helpful. But suffice it to say, this is not hard to see: when men neglect their divine responsibility, the effect is devastating. Where fathers are absent, poverty is far more likely, drug and alcohol abuse increases, academic achievement declines, physical and emotional health suffer, and crime increases.¹ So even in the absence of men embracing their divine responsibilities, we see just how sacred their role is.

Fatherhood is a gift from God. It should come as no surprise that such a sacred office would be opposed. I am talking about opposition from an enemy who Jesus teaches is the "father of lies" and whose sole purpose is to steal, kill, and destroy. Knowing just how important fatherhood is, it is no wonder that our enemy would be working to do just that: steal, kill, and destroy fatherhood.

Back to my fatherhood story. The day my first child was born awakened something deep inside me. My father's heart was more alive and aware than it had ever been. But back then, I was unaware and unprepared for a ruthless and determined enemy on the prowl. Slowly but surely, the false promises of career, title, and achievement had a numbing effect on my father's heart. Without realizing it, the hope of validation in those things slowly became more important to me than being a dad. The enemy had lured me onto a path of destruction and stolen something precious from me and my family. It would take a major shake-up to get me to see it. That is a story I will share in the pages ahead. For now, let's just say that the shake-up would come, and it was a painful experience. After years of searching for significance in doing "important" and "impressive" things, the piercing words of a faithful friend made clear what I had lost. This book is my story of rescue in the midst of failure and brokenness—a rescue that would lead to healing and a restoration of all the hope, inspiration, and beauty of my sacred role of fatherhood that had once been so clear to me on that stormy April evening.

Slowly but surely,
the false promises
of career, title, and
achievement had
a numbing effect
on my father's
heart.

I suspect something similar is what compelled you to pick up this book. Like me, something in you has been awakened. You already know how important fatherhood is. Good dads are deeply aware of their divine responsibilities to their kids and family. But for so many good men, along with that awareness, they secretly carry a heavy burden. Every day they are offering the best of their good father's heart for their family, but in spite of that they are haunted by the fear that it isn't and never will be enough. I know, because I lived under the shadow of that fear as well. If you know that burden, if you secretly fear that

your fatherhood journey is destined to end in failure and regret, there is hope.

The problem is not you or your heart. The problem for countless good men like you is simply that you lack the clarity of God's design for fatherhood. So good men like you have done exactly what you would expect. You have done your best to fulfill your sacred role, but if you're being honest, to this point you have simply been taking your best guess at what it means to do that. However, fatherhood feels way too important to be left to your "best guess." Yet what else could you do? Where could you turn? Who could teach you? Believe me, I know the weight of that burden. This book is my story of God inviting me into that same fear. It was a journey into things I did not expect—a story of rescue and discovery I now share with you.

God *does* have a great deal to say about fatherhood. It is something he very much intends for us men to know and understand. What I learned, and what we have experienced and continue to experience as a family for well over a decade, is what I offer to you here.

There is a design for fatherhood, and you can learn it.

However, it may not be what you expect. What I offer is an invitation to share in my story and, at the same time, to set out on a journey of your own. There are some things, I suspect, that will be new, unique, and maybe even seem odd to you. Some of you will find parts of this difficult, and you may even wonder at times if it is necessary. That's okay. I understand those thoughts. I had many of them myself as God led me into new, unique, and sometimes seemingly odd things. I simply ask that you hear me out—and try for yourself the things God has taught me through the years. Yes, some of it will be challenging. I can also assure you, it is worth it.

I am now a father of three children. What I share is born of my own desire for clarity and understanding for my sacred role with my children. Over time God met my desire, and we began living into that clarity and understanding beginning when my oldest son was 8. A decade later, that journey culminated in one of the most joyful and

emotional experiences of my life as his mother and I initiated him into manhood with a powerful and memorable ceremony to seal the moment. It was a joy for our family that I cannot come close to describing—a joy I very deeply long for you and your family to know as well.

But the story is far from over. It continues for my daughter, who will soon be initiated into womanhood, and my youngest son, whose initiation journey officially began the same weekend we initiated my oldest son.

And now it continues with you.

But this book isn't just for men with young children. Fatherhood is a calling we men share, and it is precious no matter where you are on that journey. Some of you may have picked up this book before your fatherhood journey has even begun. It is an outpouring of your good heart that you are already awakened to the calling of fatherhood and long to understand it even before your children are born.

Or perhaps your journey is further along and your kids are older now, your years of primary influence already largely behind you. Maybe you are starting to experience what way too many dads experience: regret and failure. Your relationship with your kids is okay, but deep down you are beginning to feel the cold breath of regret with a nagging sense that you may have been missing something. Or, worse, your relationship with your kids is becoming cold and distant, maybe even strained. Your wife is frustrated with you, and the messages of shame are starting to feel true. You are beat up, discouraged, almost defeated. Still, here you are, refusing to give up and compelled by your good father's heart to offer something precious to your kids and family.

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Finally, there are those whose children are grown and the pain of regret and failure seem to be the final word of your fatherhood journey. But you are here as an act of holy defiance, refusing to accept a lie from the same enemy who destroyed what you had in the first place. He's been working to keep you locked in despair. But your courage and resolve have kept you going. Your journey is *not* done. You have so much to offer.

Wherever you are, I want to offer you something we dads don't get too often: encouragement and hope. The world needs men to step into their sacred role of fatherhood with confidence, clarity, and understanding. However, the story of regret and failure is so common that, I'm afraid, it becomes hard for a man to envision even moderate success. Doesn't it make sense, though, that something as important as fatherhood is a role we men were made to flourish in? More than that, no matter where you are in your fatherhood journey, this is something you can experience. You are giving the best of what you know to give. But something inside is unsettled. You've been living with that secret burden—an ever present threat of regret and failure haunts you. Well, failure and regret are *not* inevitable, nor do they have the final word for you. There is hope. There is a design for fatherhood. You can understand it and learn it. You *can* flourish as a dad for your children and your family, again, no matter where you are. But just as I had to do, you must venture back into your own heart. Healing, wholeness, and redemption are still available for the courageous men who will follow God into the unknown.

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Men, you were made for many things . . . but there is nothing more sacred than your role as fathers. This book is an invitation for men—

men just like you—to embrace and fulfill the promise of fatherhood. Your heart was made to be alive to that promise. Awaken to it again. It is time for you to rekindle hope and embrace your sacred role. All that seemed possible once can be realized. You can foster intimacy with your children, faithfully shepherd your kids through the ups and downs of life, and bestow a deep sense of identity as beloved sons and daughters of God—and initiate them into adulthood, knowing with joy and pride that they are living lives of intimate apprenticeship with him.

That is the promise you were meant to fulfill. Now that something is stirring within you, the real work can begin. The journey of a thousand miles indeed begins with a single step.

Onward!

Next: Fatherhood is a gift from God given to us men. It is indeed sacred—and it is opposed.