

Family High Blood Pressure

Isaiah 30:1-26

- ¹ Oh, rebellious children, says the LORD,
who carry out a plan, but not mine;
who make an alliance, but against my will,
adding sin to sin;
- ² who set out to go down to Egypt
without asking for my counsel,
to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh,
and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt;
- ³ Therefore the protection of Pharaoh shall become your shame,
and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt your humiliation.
- ⁴ For though his officials are at Zoan
and his envoys reach Hanes,
- ⁵ everyone comes to shame
through a people that cannot profit them,
that brings neither help nor profit,
but shame and disgrace.
- ⁶ An oracle concerning the animals of the Negeb.
Through a land of trouble and distress,
of lioness and roaring lion,
of viper and flying serpent,
they carry their riches on the backs of donkeys,
and their treasures on the humps of camels,
to a people that cannot profit them.
- ⁷ For Egypt's help is worthless and empty,
therefore I have called her,
"Rahab who sits still."

A Rebellious People

- ⁸ Go now, write it before them on a tablet,
and inscribe it in a book,
so that it may be for the time to come
as a witness forever.
- ⁹ For they are a rebellious people,
faithless children,
children who will not hear

the instruction of the LORD;

¹⁰ who say to the seers, “Do not see”;
and to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us what is right;
speak to us smooth things,
prophesy illusions,

¹¹ leave the way, turn aside from the path,
let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.”

¹² Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel:
Because you reject this word,
and put your trust in oppression and deceit,
and rely on them;

¹³ therefore this iniquity shall become for you
like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse,
whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant;

¹⁴ its breaking is like that of a potter’s vessel
that is smashed so ruthlessly
that among its fragments not a sherd is found
for taking fire from the hearth,
or dipping water out of the cistern.

¹⁵ For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel:
In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.
But you refused ¹⁶and said,
“No! We will flee upon horses”—
therefore you shall flee!
and, “We will ride upon swift steeds”—
therefore your pursuers shall be swift!

¹⁷ A thousand shall flee at the threat of one,
at the threat of five you shall flee,
until you are left
like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain,
like a signal on a hill.

God’s Promise to Zion

¹⁸ Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you;
therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you.
For the LORD is a God of justice;
blessed are all those who wait for him.

¹⁹Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. ²⁰Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. ²¹And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." ²²Then you will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like filthy rags; you will say to them, "Away with you!"

²³He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; ²⁴and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. ²⁵On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. ²⁶Moreover the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when the LORD binds up the injuries of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

§

It was 1910. West Virginia was the first state to observe Mother's Day. The following year nearly every state had a Mother's Day. Two years later, in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed Mother's Day as a national holiday to be observed on the second Sunday of May.

For some time, the sentiment of Mother's Day has not been universally happy. The founder, Anna Jarvis, lamented what it became saying, "I wanted it to be a day of sentiment, not profit!"

Some come to this day with painful memories of their relationship with their mother. Others feel sadness for their mistakes as a mom...some others for their unrealized dream of becoming a mom.

Sensitive to those concerns we honor moms today and trust that God's word will speak to each of us although our situations vary.

One of our members wrote this note to her mom:

MOM, Thank you for teaching me...

- the comfort and healing of Vicks Vapor Rub
- the soothing pleasure of a warm, sweet cup of tea
- the many uses for a band aid box
- the value of a penny
- a sense of loyalty
- the importance of hard work and the solace that can be found there
- to recycle and reuse, you must have been the original recycler!
- to never sit on the toilet seat in a public restroom

- to respect others and to treat them the way I want to be treated
- the pride that can be taken from a job well done and that any job worth doing is worth doing right
- how to take turns
- how to iron a shirt
- how to laugh, with others and at myself
- how to sort laundry so the whites don't come out pink
- how to make a great vegetable soup, even if it's not ever as good as yours
- how to make "hospital" corners when making the bed
- how to be strong
- the pleasures to be found in the preparation and eating of good, simple food
- the security and delight of traditions
- the pleasure, solace, and solitude one can find in washing dishes
- that I am just as important as, but no more important than, anyone else
- that it takes more muscles to frown than to smile
- the importance of laughter
- the importance of family
- the importance of both laughter and family in getting through the tough times
- that how I behave is important, even when you're not around¹

To honor the mothers in your life, you may write such a note to your mom, or give your mom a day of rest each week from some responsibility. You could take on a weekly responsibility like filling the gas tank. You could write a list of 31 things that you appreciate from your mom (or your wife) and give them to her once a day for the next month.

One of the ways that we honor our mother is to say, "thank you, we love you".

Some of the moms honored by Scripture include:

Moses' mother's creativity saved the infant child who was so critical in God's plan for Israel.

Jesus' mom was recognized by the church as "theotokos" or god-bearer and has been a model of faith ever since.

In our time, it was not hallmark, but computer geeks who most creatively honored mothers.

Think about one of the key components of every personal computer: the mother board. It is not the father board, the grandparent board, the multiple-operational component board. It is the mother board...the computer's mom.

Moms have always been important but the images that characterize moms has changed.

¹ To Grace Eleanor Murray Bell from Sherry Bell Geis, July 13, 1996

For some, the memory of mother was watching her stand at a Hoosier Cabinet rolling out dough for noodles or bread.

Others remember their mother as one who expanded the role of homemaker by also being a working woman.

Today, moms might be described in the image of a woman sitting behind the wheel of her vehicle giving a quick look to make sure all the kids are fully in the car and then flooring the accelerator as they race to some activity.

One of moms' major responsibilities today is as activity coordinator and chauffeur. Perhaps more than any other family member, it is moms who enable kids to do all that they do.

This image of moms points to the chronic stress many families endure.

§

It used to be that moms worried about things that they could not control: war, famine, disease.

A study of middle class parents in our generation found that they worried most – not about the shortage of day care, or how much money is needed to make ends meet, nor the quality of public education. Parents worry that their children will be kidnapped by some or perverted person and vanish from sight.²

Diana Garland notes that the fears of parents today differ from previous generations in that they are worried about forces over which they have some control.

Not much can be done to prevent a war, or avoid polio, but keeping a child safe from predators, or drugs...we believe that with the right guidance and discipline that we can protect our children from those evils.

There is another complication for moms (and Dads). Parents face the ever-expanding choices of schools, sports, music, various enrichment programs and church activities.

A consequence is that we run faster and faster trying to take advantage of opportunities. Many of us lose our perspective when these *opportunities* become in our minds *expectations*.

Some today talk about families in an epidemic of busyness.³

A near-daily fear is that something unexpected will cause the family schedule to come crashing down.

Changes in the world around us increase these challenges for moms.

² See Diana R. Garland, "Family Stress" in Family Ministry, Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 204, page7 ff.

³ Doug Fields, Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry, Zondervan Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 107

- trust in the wider world has changed – although abductions may be statistically rare, no parent would leave a child in a car seat and run into the grocery.
- Neighborhood supports have also changed: a family's social supports tend to be less one's neighbors and more people who live some distance from the family home.

These erosions add mean that moms are doing more work with fewer social supports.

Increased opportunities, new fears for parents, and decreased social supports for a family leave many families struggling to meet very demanding schedules.

Today, the subject of family life for Norman Rockwell would likely not be the family at table, but the family rushing to their car.

What is interesting about the pace of family life today is that we have chosen to do most of what we are doing and we believe that it is good for our children. Furthermore, we understand that everyone is experiencing what we are. As a result, families today have adopted the attitude that chronic family stress is something to be accepted and endured rather than challenged and changed.

“I want my child to play soccer so I accept that it is going to complicate our family schedule.”
 “My child needs extracurricular activities to get into a good college so we willingly add the national honor society or the key club to the family schedule.” In quiet support of these decisions is our knowledge that everyone we know is saying nearly the same thing – “I’m running all the time”. We just accept that that’s what parenting means today?

One author describes the effect of this chronic family stress as “family high blood pressure”. Think about that image....

In itself, our family high blood pressure may not lead to immediate crisis or dysfunction, but it limits the family’s ability to cope with additional stressful events.

Add into our busy schedules the need to care for a parent, or a child with a learning issue and the level of our family stress can spike leading to additional stress and dysfunction.

Another way in which chronic family stress affects families is in observance of spiritual practices and participation in the community of faith. I hear parents say in various ways “Come Sunday, we’re just too tired.”

One wonders if our busyness allows us the time we need to process with our children the illness of a beloved grandparent, the death of a pet, a painful encounter at school, or to work through the difficulties of relationships that can happen within our families.

§

In light of the chronic stress of families, we do have some choices.

We can consider what opportunities have become expectations for us? Then we can re-evaluate and perhaps re-move some activities as high priority.

We can institute some family practices like family meals (either daily or weekly) and family celebrations which become top priority for us and then make our schedules adjust.

I overheard a conversation this week between two moms talking...no fantasizing about a community non-event night. If no activities were scheduled one night a week, we could just be a family. It's a great idea that could be pursued and perhaps even implemented.

It is likely that whatever adjustments we may make, our ability to lower our family high blood pressure will require learning what our ancient spiritual kin discovered.

§

The chronic stress that Isaiah's people in Judah faced was that they lived at a busy intersection - that land between the mighty Egyptians to the south and the aggressive Assyrians to the north. Battle storms regularly developed and the tides of war regularly threatened to flood into Judah.

These were not imaginary fears, but the problem of a minor country situated between two superpower neighbors. At one point in their history, they had had enough of the Assyrian threat so they planned that they would cozy up to Egypt. Their hope was that the Assyrian bully would be less inclined to pick on them if they stood in the shadow of their big brother, Egypt.

This was a great bargain for the Egyptians. Israel would pay them a handsome tribute to buy their protection, and Assyria would have to slog through Israel using time and precious resources before they could challenge Egypt.

To those who were tempted to put their trust in Egypt, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and challenged what they assumed to be their only course of action.

In a subtle, but not too subtle way, God reminded them of their captivity in Egypt, the danger of the dessert where Egyptian soldiers had pursued them. God had once freed them from Egypt were they willingly choosing to go back? Were they trusting Egypt for security that Egypt could not provide?

Isaiah's message to their King, Ahaz, and to the people was that ultimately, God was in control of history. As the Old Testament scholar Bernhard W. Anderson wrote, "Judah's security lies not in politics – in being a nation like other nations – but rather in returning to God...and in dependence upon his sovereign will, confident that deliverance will come from him alone and in his good time."⁴

Spiritually, the question of our Israelite kin and of us is "where do we put our trust for the future of our children?"

⁴ Bernhard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, 3rd Edition, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1975, p. 324

Is it in God's claim upon them in baptism, God's gift of gifts to them, and in God's call upon their lives?

Or have we become so like the people of the world that we trust only what we can do, how we can provide for our children, what earthly experiences and credits they can accrue for their future resumes?

The issue is subtle. We know that we are to protect and provide for our children and to train them when they are young in the way that they should go as adults.⁵

But God has promised "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."⁶

If we trust God's promise and the goodness of God's plan, then we evaluate the myriad of opportunities as possibilities, but not as what is most essential to the well-being of our children.

Instead, God has given the family as a context for the birth and nurture of children, where together we can learn of God's love and God's ways, where children can be secure in the love of God as expressed in the love of their parents, where challenges can be confronted in the confidence that God works for the good in everything, where forgiveness and reconciliation are not fantasies, but the habits of a loving, Christian family.

Families that trust in God's sovereignty value family as God's primary instrument of nurture and preparation for children. (Where both parents are not of one spiritual mind, these values can be expressed by one parent.)

Other opportunities and experiences may supplement, but can never replace the real-time important learning that happens in our family.

For that reason, Isaiah wrote

In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.

§

So what shall we do?

On the church's part, we'll do our best not to run you ragged, and not to be another contributor to family stress.

We'll not plan three youth events in one week and we'll try not to have your different age children out in consecutive nights.

⁵ Proverbs 22:6 (RSV)

⁶ Jeremiah 29:11 (NRSV)

We'll continue to be conscious of your time and strive to be as efficient as possible.

You can talk with your family about priorities and, depending on the age of your children, make more conscious choices about your options. Perhaps you play one sport rather than two, or one instrument rather than two. Or you make a choice not to play a sport the year that you are working with the key club.

You can choose to step back from the edge of calendar collapse and explore ways to reduce your family's chronic stress.

Knowing God's love and faithfulness, you can claim your family as the primary place for God's nurture of your children. Additional opportunities can be helpful but never replace the importance of family time in your children's nurture.

§

Such changes were the result of one traumatic night for Diana Garland's family. She was to pick up her son John at the grocery store snack shop. She had made this clear to John when she dropped him off for soccer practice. She even repeated the instructions: "I'll be 15 minutes late to pick you up. Go to the grocery store snack shop and wait there for me."

When she arrived he was not there. After an hour of searching and not finding John they called the police who began a search. Mrs. Garland feared the worst: that some child predator had abducted her son and she might never see the child alive again.

After two hours the k-9 unit arrived. They found a pair of John's dirty socks in the car and the police dog, AJ, began following the trail from the soccer field to a discount department store.

When they had arrived for practice, John had tried to listen to his mother's instructions, but when she said "snack bar" he had in mind the only snack bar he knew which was not in the grocery, but the discount department store. That is where AJ followed his trail led and where they found John who was wondering what had happened to his mom.⁷

It need not take such a traumatic, near-stroke experience for your family to change. You have heard a holy invitation:

In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and [with] trust [in God] shall be your strength.

Stephen M. Wilson
Oakmont Presbyterian Church
415 Pennsylvania Avenue
Oakmont, PA 15139
steve.wilson57@verizon.net

⁷ See Diana R. Garland, "Family Stress" in Family Ministry, Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 204, page7 ff.