

PHASES
Deuteronomy 6:1-9, 20-25

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
August 26, 2018

First of all, I tried to ignore it. It was my way of handling taking a third and final kid to college. Even when it was only a week away, I kept telling myself it was no big deal. In reality, however, having already made the difficult journey two times before, in my heart of hearts I knew that it was a life-changing event.

Until you've done it, no one can really prepare you for it. On the day of drop-off, you linger around, trying to avoid the inevitable. Knowing the farewell is forthcoming, you feel like you're about to face the firing squad. A final, long, lingering embrace, and, without looking back, you head to the car, you head home, heartbroken. The whole way home you ask yourself the questions: "Is she ready? Have I done all I can do? Did I teach her enough?"

What I would most compare it to is the sailing of a ship. The first floating of a boat is known as the "maiden voyage," defined as the first time a boat or a ship departs for a journey. The boat builders have poured their all into the boat, but the real question is once in the water, will it float?

On the way home from taking our youngest daughter to college, I texted someone who had been instrumental in shaping and forming her. I wrote, "When you, at last, place the boat in the water to make its first journey, you become thankful to all the builders of the boat. If they have given their all, done their best – most likely the boat will float. Thanks for all the time building and shaping Chan. On days like this one, your appreciation of those who have loved and invested in your child is beyond measure. Grateful."

Parenting is never a solo event – it's always a team effort. I know in the political arena the debate is whether it takes a village to raise a child. The accurate answer, however, is, "It takes a church to raise a child of God."

One father in our congregation wrote me, reflecting on his own experience at the empty nest. His name is Jay Barrett – no relation whatsoever, I am happy to say, to Robby Barrett. He writes:

"There are still those moments when I sit on the sofa and envision through the lens of time when all three boys were younger and still at home. There, in the playroom, I see Jeron, my middle child, at his 9th birthday party sleepover with about 10 friends, all shirtless and smelling quite fragrant, as sweaty boys will, taking turns jumping off the pool table and shouting 'Geronimo' at the top of their lungs. I see my oldest, Parker, a Longhorn fan, running through the house and screaming maniacally in 2005 after UT won the national football championship, almost delirious with excitement. Then I see my youngest (and quietest), Trey, climbing into the hammock with me in the back yard, snuggling against me and letting me rock him to sleep. I truly miss those

days and sometimes wish I could go back and re-live those moments so as to enjoy them more completely....

“Those three empty bedrooms are tangible reminders that the boys no longer dwell in our house.... I used to stand outside each door at night long after the boys had gone to sleep and spend some moments in prayer, thanking God for the blessing of being a father and asking Him to bless each son, to keep each safe, and to allow each boy to use his gifts in Kingdom work.”

Thoughts of a father with three boys.

I am speaking from the heart today. I want you to understand how First Baptist is completely committed to partnering with you to get your family ready for that day. And if you say, “Well, Pastor, I don’t have children, so this sermon is not for me” – no, these children are your children, too, if you’re part of the family of faith at First Baptist. You’re a boat builder, joining us in getting kids ready for the journey.

Out in our hallway today, on the second and third floors, we’re going to gift you with guidelines for the phases of your child’s life. I hold in my hand just a few. Here is the one we’ll give you if you have a newborn. It begins, “You’ve never known sleep deprivation like this.” It gives you some advice at this stage of the journey. Tells you what to look for physically, mentally, verbally, and emotionally [read examples]. It says being a newborn is just a phase – don’t miss it. From this first pamphlet, you have 936 Sundays to get your child ready for the journey out of the nest.

I’ll skip ahead. If you’ve got a fourth grader today, we’re going to hand you the Fourth Grade pamphlet, if you’ve got a ninth grader, we’re going to hand you the Ninth Grade pamphlet, to tell you how to get ready for this phase of development.

When we move from the new baby all the way up to the kindergartener, we’ve gone from 936 weeks to get ready to see if the boat will float to 676 weeks. How many Sundays will you be here, investing in your child’s faith, between being a new baby and kindergarten?

Let’s skip ahead to fourth grade. It’s shocking. By the time a child reaches fourth grade, we’re down to 468 Sundays to instill a moral compass in your child, to teach him or her, “Thus sayeth the Lord God Almighty.”

Oh, it’s not the church’s job alone. We’re journeying along with you. Just like the basketball coach who teaches you what to do at practice but then says, “You’ve got to also put in a little effort in your own backyard.”

Let’s go from fourth grade all the way up to ninth grade, and now we’ve only got 208 weeks – only 208 Sundays left before your child leaves the nest. In 208 weeks you’ll come face-to-face with what we’ve just experienced. And when your child enters the twelfth grade, we’ve got 52 Sundays left. That’s it. The Twelfth Grade pamphlet says your role at this stage is to mobilize your child’s potential. The countdown clock says in the twelfth grade, “You will probably feel urgency in these last 52 weeks.”

First Baptist Church is with you on the journey. And I will say this very clearly: There is no way that my family could have faced last Friday without this church family. Not only have we poured ourselves into our child for these 936 weeks, but you have poured yourself into our child as well. Our staff has poured themselves into my children. Our Sunday School teachers have poured themselves into my children. We have raised my children together.

I would never, ever, want to limit my children to only my perspective. And the Sunday School classes, camps, VBSes, mission activities, choirs, sports ministries, and girls' Bible studies have combined to make the congregation of FBC the most powerful force, second only us, in shaping my children because the church, too, is family. I dare not call out names, but I have names in my mind. You have been surrogate aunts, uncles, and grandparents. You have helped us build the boats.

I can't imagine for a moment this morning how some are so arrogant as to say, "I don't need church. I don't need community. I don't need a family of faith. I am fully equipped to get my child ready for leaving the nest by myself. We, the parents, can do it all." I would say that's an awfully arrogant position, and the stakes are way too high for you to gamble with your child's future. It was never intended by God for you to do it alone. It was always intended for us to raise children in community, side-by-side. I have two graduate degrees in religion and there is no way I would trust myself alone to equip my child with a moral compass. My children are irrevocably shaped for good by you, First Baptist.

Imagine your child is going to make a one-of-a-kind trip. Your daughter is going to cross the desert – dry, hot, miles of sand. Can you imagine sending her out on such a dangerous journey without giving her an adequate supply of water? You just hug her neck and send her on her way without any canteen of water.

Or imagine your son or daughter going into a tropical rain forest without a compass. Trees so tall, canopies so all-encompassing that you can't tell what's east or west because you can't even see the sun. Can you imagine sending him into the jungle without a compass to guide him to safety.

If my daughter is going into the desert, she's going to have a canteen of water. And if my child is going into the jungle on a journey, she will have a compass to guide, to guide her to God.

I know those are silly scenarios, because you would never imagine sending your child on such a risky journey without making sure he or she had everything they needed to not only survive, but to thrive.

Fast forward from the crib 18 years later. Your child is heading off to college or going to work. Leaving home. Making his own way, or her own way, in life. Can you imagine sending him on that type of journey – life's real journey, it's not make-believe any more, it's not a make-believe desert or a trumped up tropical rain forest – without a belief system, a value system, a time-tested truth that would guide him or her to eternity with God.

Can you imagine having a conversation with your child like this: "Honey," I might say to my daughter, "there's a big, mean world out there, and there is no really right way or wrong way to do life. Just find your own way. Create your own truth and do the best that you can." I wouldn't,

for a moment, send off one of my daughters to college that way. And I hope you wouldn't send your child into life that way either.

All of us must have a moral compass. And we can't create our own compass. There is a compass that transcends us as individuals, and only because it transcends us can it really govern our lives. If I built the guide myself, I can't trust it, because who's to say I didn't fashion it to my own favor.

Well, we're not the first ones to think that our children need a moral compass. All the way back in the book of Deuteronomy, there is a famous passage of scripture called the *Shema*.

Deuteronomy 6 starts out this way:

Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments which the Lord your God has commanded me to teach you, that you might do them in the land where you are going over to possess it, so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the Lord your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged (vs. 1-2).

Skip down to verse 4

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.

He starts out by saying in verse 4, "Hear, O Israel!"

The word is "Listen up. If you don't hear anything else I say, I want you to hear this..." is what the writer is saying. The command, "Hear, Israel," gives us the title for this sacred portion of scripture. It's the *Shema*, from the word "hear" in Hebrew. You might say these verses are the John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life") of the Old Testament. They are some of the best known from the Old Testament. Any ancient Jew, even a backslider, would have known these verses, like all Christians know John 3:16.

A compass to guide every Jew, and his son and his grandson, is that the Lord our God is one. This truth set Israel apart from all other peoples: There is only one true God, the living God. A creating God. A redeeming God. A sustaining God. And we are to love that God with our whole heart, with all of our soul, and with all of our might.

Keep these words, he says, in your heart (verse 6).

And then verse 7. You teach them to your sons. Talk about them in your house – you know, when you're sitting down and when you're walking, when you're lying down and when you're rising. In other words, it doesn't matter when or where. At every moment, tell these things to your children.

What Moses is saying in Deuteronomy is that the Israelites are to pass down the stories of God's deliverance to their children. They were never to let their children forget the Exodus. God had delivered them from bondage and slavery in Egypt. God had freed them from the hand of Pharaoh. That was their story of deliverance, and, as God's people, our story of deliverance is freedom from sin and shame through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. And we must tell our redemption story to our children and our grandchildren.

There is a current belief in our culture that says, "Don't influence your children. Let them find their own way." I understand that, ultimately, each of my children will have to make her own decisions. But, we have an absolute responsibility to do our best to teach a child the truth, stories of the gospel, handed down from generation to generation. We must teach our children how to treat God, to acknowledge Him as the one and only true God, so that in doing so we learn how to treat our neighbor – the second great commandment. You remember Jesus' great commandment comes from this passage, the Shema. Look at verse 5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." And then, remember, Jesus gave us a second great commandment. We're to love our neighbors as our selves.

I stand absolutely shocked that anyone would allow his children to fall behind in matters of faith. Our child plays a sport – we want them to make the team. Then a club team. Then a private coach. We do everything we can to make him or her the best.

When it comes to algebra, if she's struggling, we're going to take her to the learning center. We're going to find a tutor – an older sibling, a retired teacher – somebody to help my child find the way through the equation.

We'll do everything we can to give our children the advantage in reading and writing and athletics. But we'll watch those same children fall behind in regard to the development of a child's most important growth – his or her faith.

You won't be good at algebra if you skip every other algebra class. Your child will not be good at faith if you skip every other time we're gathering as a community to worship. You can't bring your child here occasionally, missing all the missions and ministries, and expect your child to excel in their spiritual development alongside their peers who are always in their place in the community of faith.

I talk more to children about their faith than anybody in this room. When a child comes to visit me to talk about baptism, I can tell you, in five minutes, whether that child's family has been faithful in bringing that child to church. Five minutes and I can tell you. Just like a dentist can tell if a child has been brushing his teeth or a music teacher can tell if a child has been practicing her piano. It shows. It makes a difference.

Faith development is the most important development – above mental, physical, or any other kind of development – and we cannot let our child get behind.

The gift of a moral compass is not easily wrapped up and placed among the graduation gifts – it is developed over a lifetime – a lifetime in a family and a lifetime in a church, a family of faith. The child must be brought up hearing the stories and the ways of faith.

There is no substitute.

This week I did two funerals, and one of them was for Wilma Smith. I asked, “What was important to your mother?” Wilma’s daughter, Callie, a member of First Baptist Church, said, “My mother didn’t talk about church a lot. She didn’t have to. We were in church every week. We had to be green or on our death bed to miss. We understood, not by her words, but by her way of life, the priority of this day and this people, this word, this faith.”

My parents brought me to church every Sunday morning. Every Sunday night. And most Wednesday evenings. It was the rhythm of our family. I never awakened on a Sunday morning with the question, “Are we going to church?” on my mind. The question would never have occurred to me. The question did not exist. I would never even have thought to ask the question. It would have been just as ridiculous for me to say on Monday morning, “Mom, am I going to elementary school today?” And just like I’d be in Wade Hampton Elementary, with my math book in my hand on Monday, on Sunday I knew I’d be at Leawood Baptist Church with my Bible in my hand. There was no other activity on God’s day that was more important than our family being with the people of God.

And I can promise you I have given my children what my father gave to me and what my grandfather gave to him. My children did not wake up this morning wondering whether or not they would be with the people of God. They would have felt empty and misplaced had they not been singing praises to their Lord and Savior today. It is the rhythm and fabric of their lives. And I can only trust and pray they will hand on what our family line has given to them – not only a love for God, but a love for God’s people, the church.

Maybe you are here this morning and your parents didn’t give you that. Maybe you’re the first generation to start the tradition. It all starts somewhere. Look at Deuteronomy 6:20: “When your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What do the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments mean which the Lord our God commanded you?’ Then you shall say to your son, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand.’”

As part of the Phases ministry here at First Baptist Church, we give your children Bibles along the journey – a copy of the word of God that is appropriate for that phase of life. Recently, Rebecca Manchee, received her preteen Bible on Sunday, August 12, 2018. On Facebook, her mom, Amy, showed the Bibles Rebecca had received along her journey of faith.

Amy posted on Facebook: “Our youngest baby girl was gifted with her third Bible from FBC Amarillo this morning. Her first was a tiny pink New Testament and Psalms, presented to her in a diaper on the day of her birth by Mrs. Elaine Clark, loaded with the many preschool opportunities for her. The second was a complete Children’s Bible presented to her by Pastor Howie at the beginning of her first grade year. Today our Children’s Ministry, led by Mr. Cliff and Miss Sarah, gifted our sixth graders with a new Bible to guide them through their teen years, as today marks

their transition into seventh grade and our church's Student Ministry. In just six more short years, she will be gifted with her fourth Bible from FBC as she graduates from high school, to take her into her years beyond high school graduation. We love our FBC family and how well they help us grow our kids in their walk with our Lord. When we returned home from church today, we looked at each Bible. It was the perfect time to remind Rebecca how her church has loved her so very well, even from the time before she was born. I am so thankful for the gift of God's love, the gift of God's Word, the gift of these people who love us so well."

In the early days of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a dilapidated log homestead had to be abandoned to make room for a lake behind the dam. A new home on the hillside had already been erected for the cabin's poor Appalachian family, but they refused to move into their beautiful new split-level ranch ("splanch," as they called it).

The day of the flooding arrived, but still the family refused to move. As the bulldozers were brought in, the Appalachian family brought out their shotguns. No amount of legal brandishings or bulldozer menacings would budge this family from their cabin.

Then someone from the TVA decided to try one last-ditch effort to end the stalemate. They called in a social worker to talk with the family and find out what their problem was. "We ain't goin' anywhere," the family announced to the social worker. "Nobody can make us. We're not budging no matter how many threats you make or how rundown our cabin may look to you!"

The social worker pleaded, "Help me to explain to the authorities why you won't move into your beautiful new home."

"See that fire over there?" the man asked, pointing to a blazing fire in the primitive hearth of the log cottage. "My grandpa built that fire over a hundred years ago," the man explained. "He never let it go out, for he had no matches and it was a long way to a neighbor's. Then my pa tended the fire, and since he died, I've tended it. None of us ever let it die, and I ain't a-going' to move away now and let grandpa's fire go out!"

This gave the social worker an idea. She arranged for a large apple butter kettle to be delivered to the home. She explained to the family that they could scoop up the live coals from the fire and carry them to the new home where they would then be poured out and fresh kindling added. In this way grandpa's fire need never go out. Would this be acceptable?

This Appalachian family huddled, and then agreed to move from their shack in the hollow to the new home on the hillside. But they wouldn't budge – until they could take with them the fire of their ancestors. (Leonard Sweet, *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Cafe*, Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998, p. 82-83)

Moses is saying, "To your sons, and to your sons' sons, teach them to love God with all their have – never let the fire go out."

Which pamphlet is yours? How many Sundays do we have left for your child? I'll be here each Sunday for your child's journey. Our staff will be here. Our church family will be here for you, giving their love, time and talents to teach your children. Will you be here?

“Hear O Israel....”