

## Storm Strong Families Ask for Answers

*Asking honest questions, Applying helpful wisdom*

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (young man who was rich, Mark 10:17)

“Jesus, why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” (John’s disciples, Matthew 9:14)

“[Jesus] By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” (Pharisees and scribes, Mark 11:28)

“Rabbi...how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (Nicodemus, John 3:4)

“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (Thomas, John 14:5)

Aaron Sobey of Columbia International University recently posted this reflection<sup>i</sup> on the university’s website. He wrote:

Imagine a world without questions.

- What if we were only able to give commands, statements, or answers? No more marriage proposals.
- You want to ask how your friend is doing? Forget about it.
- Curiosity is extinct.
- Tests, teachers, and tutors are a thing of the past.
- No one can creep out of ignorance.

A world without questions would be horrible. Questions are important. They help us discover the right answers.

I don’t know which questions you have. I hope you’re never too scared to ask God or people your questions. As Dr. Powell often says, “If you don’t ask, you’ve already got your answer.” I’m so glad we don’t live in a world without questions. Questions allow us to dig for knowledge. Our awesome God can help us receive the answers or peace that we’re desperately seeking with our worrisome questions and concerns. Our God knows everything, but he still knows the importance of asking a good question. So, let’s step out in faith. Let’s ask people and God some good questions.

Careful students of Jesus’ life have noticed something fascinating. The 4 gospel accounts reveal that Jesus was asked at least 183 questions (and probably many more which were not recorded), and Jesus himself asked people around him at least 307 questions. In his book on this Martin Copenhaver<sup>ii</sup> observes

Contrary to some common assumptions, Jesus is not the ultimate Answer Man, but more like the Great Questioner. In the Gospels Jesus asks many more questions than he answers. To be precise, Jesus asks 307 questions. He is asked 183 (questions) of which he only answers 3. **Asking questions was central to Jesus’ life and teachings. In fact, for every question he answers directly he asks—literally—a hundred.** Through Jesus’ questions, he modeled the struggle, the wondering, the thinking it through that helps us draw closer to God and better understand, not just the answer, but ourselves, our process and ultimately why questions are among Jesus’ most profound gifts for a life of faith.

The way I see it, I think Jesus knew of the danger of simply “answering” a question. Many

questioners—perhaps most?—who are just *handed* an answer much more readily dismiss it. A quick answer simply satisfies a moment of curiosity. Wisely, Jesus—almost all the time—answered a question posed to him by posing back another question.

I always smile when I hear the exchange between an aged rabbi and one of his disciples. The disciple asked his mentor, “Rabbi, why do you always answer a question with a question?” The rabbi shrugged, “What’s wrong with a question?”

A good response question requires the questioner *to think and discover* something, rather than just be handed something.

This morning, in the minutes we have, I want us to ask God some of the questions that have arisen over the past 5 weeks in the Storm-Strong series. However, in the answers He gives us, there may be a more important question to explore. Quite frankly, none of us need a handout. What we need is to discover how to actually use God’s answers and God’s wisdom.

**A storm-strong family has the humility and courage to listen to God, believe His revelation, and use His wisdom.**

**In so doing, the Lord will build their house, to their joy and to His glory.**

Psalm 127:1     Matthew 7:24-27

#4

When the members of a family are willing to work together, and to pray together, the Lord will build that house on rock.



“Jesus, you are my Savior and my Lord. You live in me through Your Spirit, powerfully in me. What kind of person do you want to make me to be?

#5

What kind of changes do you want to bring about in my thinking, in my choosing, in my relationships? How do you want to make my family ‘storm-strong’ through me?”

**Adult Question #1: As best as I/we can tell, we tried to do all we could to faithfully raise our children to know and follow the Lord. But our grown kids today are not following Jesus. Did we fail? What do we do now?**

Over these 6 weeks, a good number of you have stopped me in one of the atriums, or offered an

email to me, expressing the hurt you have felt as we've explored the potential and joy of a storm-strong family. I know that many of you have discussed this with your trusted friends. Many of you have been on your knees with your Connect Group, praying for your teenage and adult children.

So how might the Lord answer your question. Let's take up each question.

First, "**Did we fail?**" To which the Lord might answer, "Have you taken a good look at the families in the Bible?"

**Genesis 4:1** Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." <sup>2</sup> And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. <sup>3</sup> In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, <sup>4</sup> and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. <sup>6</sup> The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? <sup>7</sup> If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it." <sup>8</sup> Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

I wonder what you see in the account of the first family? I see a couple—and especially Eve—delighting in the fact that God is granting her the joy of children. Two sons. Growing up in the same home. One of them "getting it," the other "not getting it." One son offers God his best all the time; the other son always cutting corners, grudgingly giving God the left-overs. Not only that, but the bent-arrow is allowed to murder the straight-arrow. Did Adam and Eve fail?

In Parenting Beyond Your Capacity, Reggie Joiner and Carey Nieuwhof write a chapter on what they call the "Stock Family Syndrome" (internet "stock" photos of perfect, happy people which you can download). "The Stock Family (image we may have) isn't a *real* family. [And]

"When you actually go back to the Bible, the parenting examples you encounter might surprise you. They are not what you expect.

- Noah had a drinking problem
- Abraham offered his wife to another man
- Rebekah schemed with her son to deceive her husband Isaac
- Jacob's sons sold their brother into slavery
- David had an affair, multiple wives, and his own son started a rebellion against him
- Eli lost total control of how his boys acted though they were officially "priests of the Lord"

Be honest: if most of the parents in the Bible had shown up in your church, you would have suggested they go to counseling."<sup>iii</sup>

In his book *The Storm-Tossed Family*, Russell Moore is refreshingly candid:

Family is hard because family is unpredictable. You cannot plan out your life. You cannot choose your parents, or your genes, or your upbringing... You cannot know everything about your future spouse, or fit your children into some preexisting life plan. Family means vulnerability. You can be hurt. You will be hurt, and you will hurt others. You will learn to love others so much that you wish you could protect them from what's out there: being bullied at the bus-stop, that fiancé who breaks the engagement, a bone-marrow transplant in an oncology ward.

And family also exposes who we really are, stripping us of our pretensions and our masks. Family will, sooner or later, reveal that we are not the person our families need us to be. We are naked before our illusions, and those closest to us eventually learn that we do not have it all together. In the fullness of time, we will feel not only the cross on our back, but the sword through our soul.

Family is difficult because we live in a fallen world. Family is spiritual warfare.<sup>iv</sup>

So, here's what I conclude on this first question. Every family has imperfect parents and every family is broken. Any set of godly parents has resources which the Gospel, the Word, the Spirit and the body of Christ supply...and yet warfare is messy. The enemy is powerful. I know that Pamela and I often failed as parents. We don't judge one another about who failed and who didn't. That's the Lord's business. What we do offer to one another is grace, prayer, support and encouragement.

Second part, **“So, what do we do now?”** This week, our CM director Karen and I had several conversations about this, and she offered a truly helpful perspective from a pastor on the West Coast.

Let's just laugh at this lie:  
**It is too late for my children**

This lie wrongly assumes:

- It is impossible for miracles to happen in the lives of my children
- Past and current prayers are not effective concerning my children
- My mistakes as a parent make it impossible for them to change
- God's power and wisdom cannot overcome the mess they've created
- Others may not be hopeless, but my children are
- God is not putting any strong Christians in my children's lives.

The TRUTH is this – God is working powerfully in the lives of wayward children. He brought Samson back, the prodigal son back, many of us back from wayward mis-pursuits.

To overcome the lie

- **Reject hopelessness...embrace faith.** Renew your mind with the hope that God is always working behind the scenes in ways we simply often cannot see.
- **Keep growing in the Lord** – focus on demonstrating to them the life, the love, and the power of God in such a way that your children will want what you have<sup>v</sup>

**Second, here's a Kid-Question #2: Why do my parents fight?**

If a child asked Jesus that question, he might very well answer this way: *Can I ask you something? When you hear them fight, what does that do to your heart?"*

The word “fight” is an interesting description of what our kids may be experiencing. Meaning?

- *Noun* – a “battle” or “combat,” any “contest” or “struggle” [in which there is a winner, and a loser]
- *Verb* - to engage in battle or in single combat; attempt to defend oneself against or to subdue, defeat, or destroy an adversary.

So why do couples “fight,” until someone wins and someone loses? Can we learn from James 4?

James 4:1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? <sup>2</sup>You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup>You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. <sup>4</sup>You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Zane Hodges explains:

[These verses are in the *slow to anger* section of James’ letter]. What then is the cause of *quarrels and fights*? James’ answer is sharp and direct. [They] arise from *your desires for (personal) pleasure*. James’ statement virtually personifies the word “pleasures” so that these *pleasures* become like hostile soldiers who wage war within his readers. Christians at war with one another...because they were experiencing war *within themselves*, as good and evil impulses did battle with each other!

As tragic as was the selfish, inward frustration of his readers, equally bad was the fact that they had not turned to God to meet their needs. *You do not have because you do not ask*. And when they did ask (literally “asking badly”), they were asking...to spend it *on their [own] pleasures*.<sup>vi</sup>

The list of what couples’ commonly fight about is well-researched.

- |                      |                         |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Free time         | 1. Money                |
| 2. Money             | 2. Family communication |
| 3. Housework         | 3. Children             |
| 4. Physical intimacy | 4. Intimacy             |
| 5. Extended family   | 5. Time                 |
|                      | 6. Priorities           |
|                      | 7. Jealousy (rivals)    |

In my experience in the battles Pamela and I have waged over 45 years--whatever the specific

issue—I’ve found that a lot of fighting happens when selfish immaturity tries to sort out **COMPETING**

**VALUES** or **HANDLING DISAPPOINTMENTS**. Allow me to personally illustrate:

We lived in Dallas Texas during the early years of our marriage. God gave Pamela a wonderful opportunity to teach at the Trinity Christian Academy while I slugged it out in seminary classes. It was the fall, and we were encouraged to come to a Friday night football game where Trinity played rival on the schedule. Just before we were to leave, I pulled out a crumpled sweatshirt from the dresser, threw it on over my head, and said, “Let’s go!”

Pamela stopped. “Will you please iron that sweatshirt?”

“Iron the sweatshirt? No way? Why would anyone iron a sweatshirt before going to a football game.”

“It’s the first time my colleagues will meet you. I want you to look nice.”

“It’s a football game, for gosh sakes! No way...no way...c’mon, we’ll be late for the game!”

We went—I unironed—and she spent much of the night feeling embarrassed.

But I won! (not really)

Competing values. Why were the values of “looking nice” and “wearing a favorite un-ironed sweatshirt” in competition? They didn’t need to be, except I was too selfish, too immature, too committed to winning the fight...to love my young wife, my friend, the way she deserved to be loved.

“Love,” Paul wrote by the Spirit, “does not insist on its own way” (1 Cor 13:5).

According to marriage and family counselor **Dr. John Gottman** - conducted more than 40 years of research with more than 3,000 married couples, a true expert in this field - 69 percent of marriage conflicts never are solved. Yes, 69 percent! That means we often are having the same fight over and over again. He calls these unresolved issues ‘gridlocked’.

If a gridlocked issue comes up on a daily basis and you need to approach it, start with agreement. **Dr. Gottman noticed that successful couples who have been together for a long time master gentleness.** They present issues in a soft way by never starting with criticism. In fact, starting with agreement is the best way to avoid an argument and start a discussion. Find something you can agree upon and start there.<sup>vii</sup>

Successful couples, humble couples, “master gentleness.” A fruit of God’s Spirit, and an assurance to their listening children that their dad and mom are friends, and not rivals.

**Adult Question #3** Having come from a family of divorce, I wonder how to know if my marriage is healthy or how to prioritize my relationship with my spouse is obviously difficult. I would love to hear more practical ways you’ve learned from experience and scripture on how to do marriage well.

How to do marriage well. Yesterday, I asked Pamela what she would say were the factors that kept us together for over 4 decades. Ten minutes later, after she stopped giggling, she offered some ideas. It reminded me of an interview I heard with Ruth Graham, Billy Graham’s wife. Once asked if she had ever considered divorcing Billy, “No,” she smiled. “Murder? Definitely...but not divorce.”

My wife’s answer began with thoughts about being “patient” and true, persistent 1 Corinthians 13 ‘loving.’ But she also highlighted **COMMITMENT**. Here are her exact words: “God said ***I should***, and I said ***I would***.” There were days when both of us wanted out...or at least a good distance from each other. But our respect for God’s command, and our promise of “till death us do part” were also very important.

I might add that there have been some simple keys for us...some we are still working on

- The importance of praying in your relationship
- The importance of having fun, of laughing together
- The importance of full disclosure and communication – no nurturing of side-relationships which take the place of your primary relationship (Ephesians 4:25 “speak truth with one another”)
- The importance of quality friends
- The importance of growing in humility (mutual submission, confessing sin, forgiving sin...understanding you’re oneness)

## CONCLUSION

Let me close with a challenge in Dr. Willard Harley’s excellent book *His Needs Her Needs for Parents*. In his ministry with struggling couples, he sets down “The Policy of Undivided Attention” – *give your spouse undivided attention a minimum of 15 hours each week, using the time to meet his or her needs for intimate affection, intimate conversation, sexual fulfillment, and recreational companionship*. This rule requires PRIVACY (not include children), OBJECTIVES (habits and fun things together that provide for those needs), and AMOUNT (enough time that reflects your love for each other).

“It’s incredible how many couples have tried to talk me out of having them spend more time together. They try to convince me that it’s impossible. They argue it’s impractical. But in the end, they usually agree with me that without time for undivided attention, they can’t recreate the love they once had.”

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<sup>i</sup> “The Importance of Asking Questions,” <https://www.ciu.edu/content/importance-asking-questions>

<sup>ii</sup> in *Jesus is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered*. *Jesus is the Question* considers the questions Jesus asks—what they tell us about Jesus and, more important, what our responses might say about what it means to follow Him

<sup>iii</sup> Reggie Joiner, Carey Nieuwhof, *Parenting Beyond Your Capacity: Connect Your Family to a Wider Community* (David C. Cook, 2010), 37-43.

<sup>iv</sup> Moore, Russell D. *The Storm-Tossed Family: How the Cross Reshapes the Home*. (B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition).

<sup>v</sup> Steve Backlund, *Igniting Hope Ministries*

<sup>vi</sup> Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing* (Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 89-94.

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.scienceofpeople.com/couples-fight/> cf. Drs. John and Julie Gottman, The #staymarried podcast.