

# BIG PICTURE PARENTS

## Ancient Wisdom for Modern Life

### HARRIET CONNOR

Being a parent in the modern world is tough. We are often overwhelmed with fear about damaging our children, guilt about our imperfections, and confusion about our role. Harriet Connor knows these feelings well. But hers is not just another parenting book full of “shoulds and shouldn’ts” to make you feel worse. Rather, she invites you to step back and consider the bigger picture:

*What is the purpose of life and parenthood?*

*What are our human limitations?*

*How can we cope with our guilt and fear?*

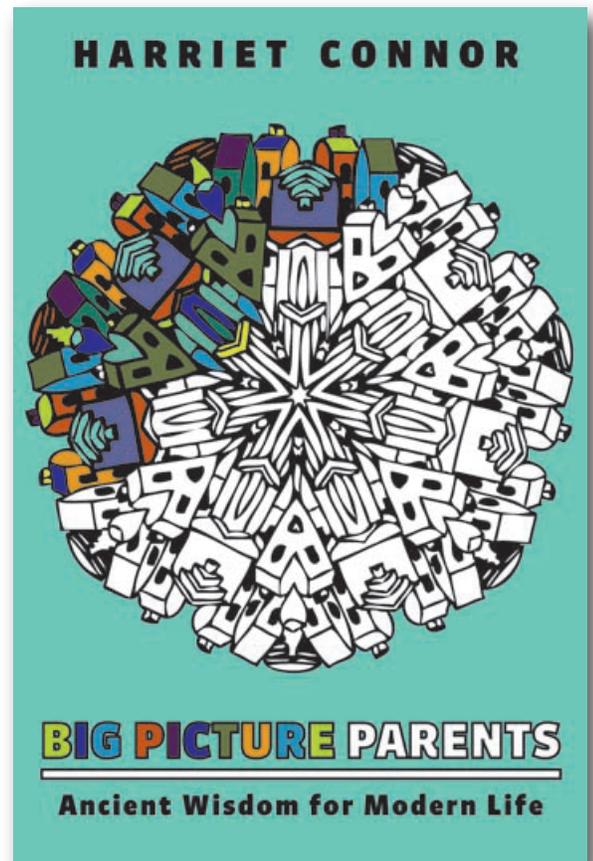
*What are our family’s values and how do we pass them on?*

*What is our family’s structure and place within the wider community?*

When she was desperate for answers, Harriet Connor turned to the ancient wisdom of her ancestors—the Bible. She went looking for little pieces of grandmotherly advice, but what she found was a grand vision—a big picture—that made sense of both life and parenthood.

Whether you are new to the Bible or have read it before, you will not regret taking time to reflect on its message, which has given comfort and guidance to generations of parents just like you.

**ISBN: 978-1-5326-0253-5 | 170 pp. | \$22 | paper**



“I wish this book had been written when I first became a mother almost thirty years ago. *Big Picture Parents* is a thoroughly readable, wise, and encouraging book. It provides a helpful biblical framework and a fresh way of thinking about being a parent. I will be giving it to any new parent or about-to-become parent to help them as they make the enormous change from life before children to life after delivery. This book will be a blessing to all parents.”

—SARAH CONDIE, pastor; Co-director, the Mental Health and Pastoral Care Institute, Sydney, Australia

“All we want is for our children to be happy’ is the absolute unchallenged axiom of our time. But what if, ironically, by chasing this elusive goal we are making not just our children, but ourselves less happy? This book gives parents a wise framework for understanding our children, ourselves, and our world. In doing so, not only will the parent be happier, but so also will the child.”

—SAM CHAN, national communicator, City Bible Forum, Australia; public speaker; theologian; author of *Preaching as the Word of God*

“This is a refreshing book, written with humor and grace. It is full of biblical wisdom and its practical outworkings, for all kinds of families.”

—KIRSTEN BIRKETT, Latimer Research Fellow, Oak Hill College, UK; author of *Resilience – A Spiritual Project* and *The Essence of Family*

**Harriet Connor** juggles three roles: she is a wife, mother of three, and Bible teacher. She holds degrees in International Studies (Languages) and Theology.

**Media, Examination, and Review Copies:**  
Contact: James Stock  
(541) 344-1528, ext 103 or James@wipfandstock.com

**Orders:** Contact your favorite bookseller or order directly from the publisher via phone (541) 344-1528, fax (541) 344-1506 or e-mail us at orders@wipfandstock.com

# Big Picture Parents

*Ancient Wisdom for Modern Life*

Harriet Connor

RESOURCE *Publications* • Eugene, Oregon

BIG PICTURE PARENTS  
Ancient Wisdom for Modern Life

Copyright © 2017 Harriet Connor. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Resource Publications  
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers  
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3  
Eugene, OR 97401

[www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-5326-0253-5  
HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-5326-0255-9  
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-5326-0254-2

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®.

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

# Contents

*Acknowledgments* | ix

Introduction: Why I Wrote This Book | 1

## Part 1: Our Big Purpose

1. The Purpose of Life: Seeking More Than Happiness | 13
2. The Purpose of Parenthood: Aiming for More Than Bedtime | 23

## Part 2: Our Big Problem

3. The Limits of Being Human: Our Guilt and Fear | 35
4. Parents in Need of a Parent: Finding Forgiveness and Comfort | 47

## Part 3: Our Big Values

5. Christian Values: Remembering What Is Important | 65
6. Passing On Our Values: Practicing What We Preach | 81

## Part 4: Our Big Family

7. Our Ideal Family Structure: Parents United and In Charge | 101
8. God's Big Family: Belonging to a Wider Community | 118

Conclusion: Becoming Big Picture Parents | 135

*Recommended Reading* | 143

*Appendix: Questions for Group Study* | 147

*Bibliography* | 157

---

## INTRODUCTION

# Why I Wrote This Book

### Me, the Typical Modern Parent

THIS BOOK STARTED LIFE as a personal project. A few years ago, my husband, Daniel, and I felt like we were adrift in a flimsy boat, tossed about by a stormy sea of parenting “shoulds and shouldn’ts”—we desperately needed to find an anchor. It was a time when the routines of our daily life seemed insignificant and disappointing—we desperately needed a bigger picture to fit into. Out of that desperate search, this book was born.

I always thought that being a parent would come naturally to me. Ever since my days as a teenage babysitter, all of my jobs have involved caring for or teaching children in some way, which I did with great confidence and joy.

But then I became a mother. On a warm Monday night one November, our first son came rushing into the world, and it changed me forever. A new sense of wonder and delight filled my heart—what a precious gift we had received! But when the time came to take our baby home, we hesitated—should the hospital really let two unqualified beginners take this tiny human home? My confidence had disappeared overnight. Now the stakes were so much higher—this was *our* child and I thought that everything was down to us. I felt I had to get this thing right—perfect, in fact—or our child would bear the scars for the rest of his life.

Over the weeks and months that followed, Daniel and I did our best to give our baby what he needed: milk, sleep, and lots of love. We enjoyed every new stage, marveling at all he was learning. But once our son became

old enough to say “no”, it quickly became clear that parenting this little boy was not going to come naturally to either of us. Since then, we have had two more sons. On a good day, I dare to think that we might be getting better at parenting with practice. But on other days, I think we are just making three times the mess of it than before.

A large part of our struggle is that Daniel and I come from very different families. And naturally, each of us tends to assume that the way we were raised was right, or at least normal. Daniel’s parents were quite strict, and expected him and his sisters to obey them simply “because I said so”, with little room for questions or explanations. If they did not obey straight away, they could expect to be given a smack (spanking)<sup>1</sup>. There were rules about most aspects of daily life, and the rules were fairly inflexible.

My parents were the opposite. I don’t remember having any rules at all, and punishment was extremely rare—I remember being smacked (spanked) only twice in my whole life! Once was when I was about to cross a busy road without looking. And let’s just say the other one involved a skipping rope handle and a brand new piano. Usually, my parents simply explained why we should not do something, and that must have been enough for me and my sister. We never really thought to test the boundaries. I think our parents treated us like adults from a very young age and we simply stepped up to their expectations.

Because of our different upbringings, Daniel and I find that we are often at odds with each other, whether we are discussing the daily routines of eating, sleeping, and playing; or the more philosophical questions of authority, obedience, and discipline. On many occasions, Daniel and I think that what the other person is doing or saying is not just misguided, but ethically wrong. And we end up feeling confused, misunderstood, and upset.

### Modern Parents: Cast Off from Our Traditions and Adrift among the Voices

I recently read an entertaining and insightful book called *French Children Don’t Throw Food* (called *Bringing Up Bébé* in the USA) by Pamela Druckerman. The thing that intrigued me was the title—how could an

1. Due to the different ways these terms are used across the English-speaking world, I have used both words throughout this book. In British and Australian English, the word “smack” is the equivalent of the American word “spank”; that is, to discipline a child by hitting them (usually on the buttocks) with an open hand.

---

## INTRODUCTION: WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

entire nation of parents agree on how to raise children? But by and large, throughout France they do. By contrast, in our society, there seem to be so many different ways of parenting. Most young parents I know are confused and uncertain about what to do.

Part of the reason for this is that our generation is much more mobile and multicultural than that of our parents and grandparents. We are more likely to move away from where we grew up, or to marry someone from a different cultural tradition. Because of this, we are not so firmly grounded in a single, local community, bound together by a common set of values. In the past, the adults in a community generally agreed on the attitudes and behaviors that were acceptable. Even the local bus driver or shop keeper had tacit permission to “parent” other people’s children when they were not around. But no one would dare to do that today! Raising children is now seen as a private affair, with each family determining their own attitudes and values. This can make us feel like there are a thousand different ways to raise a child, and it is up to us to work out our approach from scratch.

But for most of human history, parenthood was a skill gained in the way an apprentice learns a trade. First, you watched an experienced practitioner (a “master”); then you assisted with the work, gaining the necessary skills along the way; and finally, you qualified as a practitioner in your own right.

My grandmother talks about how she had the chance to practice looking after a baby from the age of fourteen; her older sister had moved home to have her first child, because her husband was away fighting in the Second World War. The “master” parent of the house was my great-grandmother. She was permanently confined to a wheelchair due to rheumatoid arthritis. But while she and her husband were happy (and able) to employ staff to help with the cooking and cleaning, they felt that raising children was something they could never delegate. And so, my grandmother and her sister watched and learnt from my great-grandmother. Within the apprenticeship model, one person simply passes on the values, attitudes and skills that were passed onto them.

By contrast, I am a “childcare kid.” From a very young age I did not see my parents or my sister during business hours. I had never seen a stay-at-home mother in action until I became one! Many of my mother’s generation relied on their mothers and mothers-in-law to mind their children while they went out to work. But the working mothers of the eighties have become the working grandmothers of today. Consequently, many of them are

---

INTRODUCTION: WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

not around during the week to offer hands-on help and advice to their adult children. And so, a lot of wisdom about parenting is being lost between the generations. When we “outsource” childminding to professionals outside the family, our collective wisdom can become fractured. As we watch paid experts relate to our children, we can also begin to feel that we do not have the necessary qualifications to raise our own children.

In the absence of “master parents” to learn from, our generation usually turns to our peers or, more commonly, to the internet for guidance. But there we find that the field of parenting has become a battlefield, staked out by experts with strong and conflicting opinions about how parents *should* be doing things, backed up by (apparently) scientific studies proving that any other way is harming your children. An apprenticeship is no longer enough—it seems that now you need a university degree even to qualify as a parent. In fact, I have a friend who, for that very reason, undertook a diploma of childcare when she became a mother.

Parenting in our generation feels harder than ever before, because we are completely overloaded with information about what we should be providing for our children. In the past, parents did not know so much about the science of their parenting; they just did their best with the information they had, gaining confidence through experience and observation. Apart from the occasional rebel, most people did more or less what their parents had done before them.

But in our generation, we have access to reams of scientific information about what our children should eat, how much they should sleep, what emotional needs they have at each stage, how they should play, what educational opportunities they need, and so on. This greater access to information has no doubt improved life for children in many ways. But there is a catch—the more access we have to information and resources, the more responsible we feel to provide the best for our children. The more we know about what we *should* be giving our children, the greater guilt we feel about falling short.

It feels like there is a parenting expert whispering in my ear all day, and it makes me feel guilty: “Have they had their five servings of vegetables today? Shouldn’t they sleep for a bit longer? Have they practiced some age-appropriate gross and fine motor skills this week? Did you check how much sugar was in that snack? Aren’t they watching too much TV?”

But all of this information and advice crowds out the more important questions of parenthood. We are so caught up on the tiny details—all the

---

INTRODUCTION: WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

“shoulds and shouldn’ts”—that we forget to step back and ask ourselves what parenthood is all about. We might be able to tell you our views on bottle feeding, co-sleeping, smacking (spanking), screen time, sugar, child-care, and so on. But very few of us can tell you exactly what we are aiming for, or how we plan to get there. We have lost sight of the bigger picture.

As a result, many of us are struggling to make sense of our lives. We know how to make ourselves happy for a moment, but not for a lifetime. We have created many “small pictures” to give our life meaning—our job, our interests, our house, our children, our holidays, our causes—but we have a sneaking suspicion that perhaps they don’t add up to much.

The loss of a big picture is certainly having an impact on modern parents. Jennifer Senior, author of *All Joy and No Fun: the Paradox of Modern Parenthood* writes,

There’s no denying that our lives as mothers and fathers have grown much more complex, and we still don’t have a new set of scripts to guide us through them. Normlessness is a very tricky thing. It almost guarantees some level of personal and cultural distress.<sup>2</sup>

In her book, *Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World is Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About It*, Sue Palmer writes,

Most parents are frantically doing their best in a world where the goal posts are not just moving—they’ve actually disappeared . . . In a world of tumultuous change, confidence is thin on the ground. The moral and social certainties that once produced the adult alliance have disintegrated, and there seems to be nothing to put in their place.<sup>3</sup>

## Reconnecting with Wisdom from the Past

A lifeline for me has been talking to my grandmothers on the phone. They can remember what it was like to be at home with small children, and a chat with them always helps to put things into perspective. It helps me to sift out the momentary fads of our time from the time-tested wisdom of generations. I often ask find myself asking, “What would Granny have done?”

2. Senior, *All Joy and No Fun*, 7.

3. Palmer, *Toxic Childhood*, chapter 10, para. 4; chapter 10, section 2, para. 1.

INTRODUCTION: WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

It might sound strange, but I have always had a deep desire to live a life that would make my ancestors proud. They lived through times that were much tougher than ours, often characterized by war, disease, and poverty. Daily life was plain hard work, with little choice and little comfort. I often find myself telling our boys how their great-grandparents, who were children during the Great Depression, would have been excited just to get an orange in their Christmas stocking!

In the West, our lives are so different now—brimming with choice and comfort. One of my great-grandmothers was still alive when I was younger—she was born in 1900, and lived to the age of ninety-seven. In her lifetime alone, she witnessed incredible changes. When my great-grandmother was born, only the rich had a telephone or a car, and the arrival of television was still half a century away!

I don't want our modern comforts to turn me or my children into the "spoiled brats" down the bottom of the family tree. I don't want to get swept along by the currents of our era and lose touch with the big values that got my ancestors through the toughest of times. And so I love to listen to my grandmothers talk about what life was like in previous generations.

As I have listened carefully to the wisdom of my grandmothers, I have realized that there is more to their advice than just scattered bits of useful information. Their wisdom is embedded in a much bigger picture—a whole way of thinking about the world. Their generation inherited this way of thinking from their parents, who inherited it from their parents before them, and so on. And in the West, that worldview—that "big picture" in which they parented—had grown out of Christianity.

Beginning with the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, the Christian view of the world gradually won over the hearts and minds of the people of Europe. And it was this worldview, taught in the pages of the Bible, which shaped European cultural ideas about the meaning of life and consequently, parenthood.

One of the most precious things I own is a small Church of England Prayer Book that my grandmother, Anne, handed down to me. It was originally given as a gift to Anne's mother, Dorothy, from *her* mother, on the occasion of Dorothy's wedding in 1911. Mine are the fifth set of hands to hold that little heirloom. And for me, the book has become a symbol of the "big picture" worldview which stands behind the wisdom of my ancestors. I imagine my great-grandmother carrying it to church on her wedding

---

INTRODUCTION: WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

day, and reading aloud its prayers and liturgy—her human response to the words of the Bible that she would have heard in church that day.

Ours is the first generation in the West that has not been taught the Bible. My parents, as they grew up, were handed down a thorough knowledge of the Bible. Even though they chose to reject Christianity as young adults and stopped reading the Bible, they still lived in a society which was shaped by its values. In a fascinating book called *The Book that Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization*, Indian historian Vishal Mangalwadi traces the development of key Western values, such as the freedom and dignity of humanity, the value of science and technology, universal education, heroism, integrity, and compassion back to their origins in biblical Christianity. He demonstrates why these values arose out of a Christian worldview, and no other.

In another recent book, *The Great Bible Swindle . . . And What Can Be Done About It*, Greg Clarke argues convincingly that in the West, we need to know the Bible simply in order to understand our own language, literature, art, and culture. But he laments that ours is the first generation to be “swindled” out of such an education.

The passing on of the ancient wisdom of the Bible has all but petered out. Most of my friends seem to think that, as a society, we have outgrown Christianity. Many of them have strong beliefs about what is wrong with the Bible, Christians, and their message. But are we in danger of cutting off the branch we are sitting on? Our parents’ generation at least read and studied the Bible, before many of them chose to reject it. But our generation often rejects Christianity out of hand, without ever having read the Bible for ourselves.

About four years ago, we were struggling to manage an emotional two-and-a-half year old and a newborn baby. I spent my days battling with a toddler who would not comply, and a baby who would not sleep. I remember the dread that would slowly rise in me as the sun went down. I feared that the hours of broken sleep ahead would not be enough to refuel me for another day in the ring. I was an anxious, sleep-deprived mess, desperate for guidance. But when I looked online for advice about parenting, it only confused me even more. To make matters worse, Daniel and I never seemed to agree on how to improve our situation.

It was then that I decided to reach for the ancient wisdom of my ancestors. I figured that generations of parents before me had grown up seeing the world, and their children, through the lens of Christianity. So I resolved

## INTRODUCTION: WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

to read through the Bible from start to finish and find out exactly what it had to say to parents like me. It took me a whole year, but I did it. And what I found was more than I had bargained for. I went looking for little pieces of grandmotherly advice, but the Bible gave me something much bigger. It gave me a grand vision—a “big picture”—which has put my life and my role as a parent into perspective. As I read, I found that the daily story of our little family began to sink into the strong embrace of a much bigger story; a story that began “in the beginning” and stretches into eternity.

### Do We Really Need another Parenting Book?

My grandmother has rightly warned me that reading too many parenting books and articles will only serve to undermine my confidence. When she was raising young children, the only source of advice my Granny had were the letters her mother wrote. Her mother’s parenting philosophy was simple, but brilliant: “Do your best.”

So why am I now adding to the mass of information that parents probably shouldn’t be reading? Because if we want to make sense of all the advice we hear, we need to have a big picture. This book will not fill your mind with hundreds of new parenting strategies that you *should* implement immediately. I trust that after reading this book, you will have the confidence to make those day-to-day parenting decisions for yourself. Rather, reading this book will help you to soar high above the “parenting wars” and controversies and to see your role from a new perspective. Once you have the big picture in mind, you can choose to home in on whatever information and advice supports your aims and values, and confidently disregard the rest.

As we explore the story of the Bible, my hope is that you will become a “big picture parent” who:

- Knows your purpose in life and parenthood
- Accepts your human limitations
- Does not parent out of guilt or fear
- Knows your family’s values
- Strives to pass your values onto your children
- Strengthens your family’s structure
- Sees your family as part of a wider community

INTRODUCTION: WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

I hope that you will come to see that the Bible creates a true and meaningful big picture in which parents and children can find their place. And perhaps, like me, you will gradually find your confusion giving way to clarity; your guilt and fear, to freedom; and your uncertainty, to the confidence that comes from being a Big Picture Parent.

|

—

—

|

PART 1

# Our Big Purpose

|

—

—

|

## The Purpose of Life: Seeking More Than Happiness

A VISITOR TO THE modern West would have good reason to believe that the goal we are striving for in life is happiness. Our guiding principle seems to be, “Do whatever makes you happy; follow your heart.” How you feel is more important than what you do. Contemporary wisdom says that if you are unhappy in a relationship or in a job, then you should leave it and find a new one. We are on a constant quest to find our “happily ever after”: the perfect partner, the perfect body, the perfect job, the perfect house. When we become parents, we expect that parenting will make us happy, too; after all, children are our “bundles of joy.”

Even if we don't really believe that constant happiness is the aim of life, it seems to be the message we are passing on to the next generation. If you ask parents about what we want for our children, we respond in unison, “We just want them to be happy!” We want our children to feel good about themselves all the time. We give them lots of praise and tell them that they can be anything they want to be. We give them a helping hand to make sure they never feel they have failed. We protect them from getting hurt, whether physically or emotionally. And we sometimes give them whatever they want, just to stop them crying. We simply cannot bear to see our children unhappy.

The first graduates from this generation of “feel-good” children are now growing up, and ironically, they are far from happy. A recent Australian survey concluded that 14 per cent of children between the ages of four and seventeen have some sort of mental disorder. Among sixteen- to seventeen-year-olds surveyed, around 19 per cent of females and 8 per cent

PART 1: OUR BIG PURPOSE

of males experienced major depressive disorders associated with self-harm and suicidal tendencies.<sup>1</sup> These kind of alarming statistics are also playing out in the UK and the USA.<sup>2</sup> This generation is also exhibiting poor resilience, poor life skills, and poor behavior. They have attracted labels such as “bonsai” children, fragile “tea cups”, the “entitled” generation and “generation me.”

And it is not just children who are suffering a crisis of happiness. Rates of depression and anxiety among adults in the West have never been higher. In any given year, almost 30 per cent of the adult population will suffer from a recognized psychiatric disorder; one in five people will suffer from clinical depression at some point in their life.<sup>3</sup> It seems that the more we chase happiness, the less we seem to find it. If *feeling* good is so elusive, maybe we were made for something more—maybe there is a bigger purpose to life.

In the light of the West’s epidemic of mental health problems, even secular thinkers are coming to the conclusion that lasting happiness does not come from chasing the things that make us feel good and avoiding those that don’t. In his book, *The Happiness Trap*, psychologist Russ Harris describes true happiness like this:

When we clarify what we stand for in life and act accordingly, then our lives become rich and full and meaningful, and we experience a powerful sense of vitality. This is not some fleeting feeling—it is a profound sense of a life well lived. And although such a life will undoubtedly give us many pleasurable feelings, it will also give us uncomfortable ones, such as sadness, fear and anger. This is only to be expected. If we live a full life, we will feel the full range of human emotions.<sup>4</sup>

Others go one step further, saying that this kind of “full life” is only possible when we see ourselves as part of a bigger picture—when we feel connected to the people around us. Richard Eckersley summarizes contemporary research into happiness in this way: “One necessary condition for meaning is the attachment to something larger than the self.”<sup>5</sup> Hugh McKay, the Australian social researcher, argues that “the measure of a good

1. Ainley et al., “Mental Health of Children”, 9.
2. See Devon, “Britain’s child mental health crisis”; Weale, “Child mental health crisis”; Perou et al., “Mental Health Surveillance Among Children,” Summary.
3. Harris, *Happiness Trap*, 12.
4. Ibid., 15
5. Eckersley, *Well & Good*, 6.

life could hardly be based on some assessment of how happy we are; it will depend primarily upon how well we treat others, regardless of how that makes us feel.”<sup>6</sup>

This echoes the wisdom of parents in previous generations, who were not primarily concerned with making their children happy. They sought to give their children a sense of their place and purpose in the world. Happiness was simply a by-product of a meaningful life; *feeling* good was less important than *doing* good.

When I opened up the Bible, looking for guidance as a parent, I realized that it has been saying the same thing all along: humans were made for much more than the pursuit of happy feelings—we were made to find our meaning in relationship with others.

## We Are Made for Relationship

Surely, the biggest questions humans have ever asked are: “Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life?” The opening verses of the Bible address these very questions:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.  
(Genesis 1:1-5)

This evocative, poetic chapter describes God’s work of creation over six days. In the beginning, the universe was formless, empty, and dark. But simply by speaking, God lit up the darkness, brought order to the chaos, and filled up the empty earth with abundant life. Out of nothing, God created the entire universe and everything in it. At the climax of the chapter come the following verses:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

6. McKay, *Good Life*, chapter 2, para. 7.

## PART 1: OUR BIG PURPOSE

So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1:26-28)

As humans, our nature and purpose are defined in relationship to our Maker; we are stamped with his “image” and “likeness.” And what is this resemblance to God we have? Firstly, it is our relationship to creation—we are not just another species of animal, but have the responsibility of ruling over the earth (and its plants and animals) as God’s representatives. The second aspect to the image of God we bear is our capacity for relationship with each other. We were created “male and female”—different, but united in our humanity. God’s first blessing for humanity is the gift of sex—a physical act of unity, which in turn has the potential to “fill the earth” with a whole new generation of people who bear God’s image.

If our “godlike” nature is our capacity for relationship with creation, God, and each other, then our purpose in life is to do these things well—in the way that God intended.

### Made to Rule Creation

The second chapter of Genesis retells the creation of humanity in a more detailed, personal way and gives us a picture of what it means to rule creation well:

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil . . .

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” (Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17)

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE: SEEKING MORE THAN HAPPINESS

Ruling over creation well involves, firstly, taking care of it. Secondly, we have the privilege of “working it”—we can use its natural resources to provide us with food, clothing and shelter.

Daniel and I recently watched a television program about British families who had left the UK to live in exotic places. One family had moved to a remote island in Tonga to enjoy a simpler way of life. When they arrived, they had to camp out in tents for over a year while they built their house out of whatever they could find on the island. They felled their own trees for timber, and created stone walls out of blocks of rock and shell which they found on the beach. But it was not just shelter they needed; they built two large water tanks and a home-made wind generator on the hill behind their house. A typical meal was fish they had caught, steamed in homegrown banana leaves, together with fruit and vegetables from their garden. When the garden needed fertilizer, they took a boat to another island, where they scooped out bags full of bat dung from a cave!

We watched this family with a mixture of admiration and disbelief. While we found their decision to live like that hard to understand, it was a good reminder of just how dependent humans are on using nature well. For people like me, who live in the city, it is easy to lose sight of our relationship with nature. Many of us have lost the skills of growing and making our own food, clothing, and shelter from nature; everything comes in a packet, from a shop. But for most of human history (and in less developed parts of our world today), people have lived like this family, acutely aware of their need to “work” the earth for these things.

However, the account in Genesis shows that we cannot be rulers over creation—working it and taking care of it—without reference to God, who made both the earth and us. God gave humanity immense freedom in allowing Adam to eat from any tree he chose. But there was also a limit to Adam’s sovereignty—he was not allowed to eat from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Humanity was to look to God alone for moral guidance.

Throughout the rest of the Bible, our purpose as rulers or stewards of creation seems to fade into the background to some extent. The Bible writers probably just took it for granted that humans would care for and work the earth, because doing this well is so necessary to our survival. It is humanity’s relationships with God and other people which become the main focus of the Bible’s teaching.

PART 1: OUR BIG PURPOSE

But those of us who live in the West—in our highly urbanized and technology-dependent society—are at risk of losing touch with this aspect of our humanity. Researchers are warning of an epidemic of so-called “nature deficit disorder” among modern children, who spend significantly less time outdoors than their parents did. Research is beginning to show that time spent playing and working in nature benefits our physical and mental health, and equips us with many important skills for life.<sup>7</sup>

### Made to Honor God

In the Bible, humanity’s relationship with God is founded on the fact that he is our Creator. As parents, we expect our children to respect us as the ones who gave them life. In a similar way, God expects people to honor (or “glorify”) him, because he is the one who gave us life. Through the prophet Isaiah, God spells this out:

Bring my sons from afar  
and my daughters from the ends of the earth—  
everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made. (Isaiah 43:6b-7)

In Malachi, God says to a community which was failing to honor him, “A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” (Malachi 1:6a). Our purpose in life is to honor our Creator. We do this by acknowledging him as the one who gave us life. But we also honor him by seeking to use our life in the way he intended. As human parents, we hope that the children we “create” will be a credit to us. When we see them doing something that makes us proud, we want to shout out, “That’s my boy!” or “That’s my girl!”

When our son started school for the first time last year, I was nervous about whether his behavior would reflect our values. Would he listen to his teacher? Would he be kind to his class mates? Would he be enthusiastic to learn? We wanted him to live according to our values, according to the way we have raised him. In a similar way, we honor our Maker by living out his values in the world.

7. Louw, *Last Child in the Woods*, 3.

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE: SEEKING MORE THAN HAPPINESS

The Bible is full of stories about real, ordinary people struggling to honor God by living according to his values. While some do better than others, there is only one human who did this perfectly: Jesus. Jesus lived out his purpose as a human to the fullest. Appropriately, he called himself the Son of God. On one occasion, Jesus said, “I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me . . . I always do what pleases him” (John 8:28, 29). Jesus later claimed, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus reflected God’s values so perfectly that you could look at what *Jesus* did and know exactly what *God* was like.

In chapter 6, we will look at God’s values in more detail. But here is a helpful summary that Jesus gave, when someone asked him about which commandments were most important to God:

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-39)

Jesus taught that people were created for relationship with God and for relationship with other people.

### Made to Love Other People

The final aspect to the image of God which we bear is our capacity for relationship with each other. Genesis 1:27 describes humanity as the unity of male and female. In the more personal narrative of chapter two, God says, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18). And that is exactly what he did, taking a part of Adam’s side (traditionally, a rib) and making a woman from it.

When Adam first saw the woman God had made, he could not contain his joy; here was someone just like him, but at the same time not quite like him.

The man said,  
“This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called ‘woman,’  
for she was taken out of man.” (Genesis 2:23)

## PART 1: OUR BIG PURPOSE

God bound Adam and the woman, Eve, together in marriage. As they shared in sexual intimacy, they became “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). And we read that later on, their relationship produced children. The first human relationships were those between a husband and wife and their children.

However, just as our ruling of creation comes under God’s ultimate authority, so do our relationships with each other. Our purpose is to relate to others in the way God intended. A few generations after Adam and Eve, God restated his blessing of humanity, but added, “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind” (Genesis 9:6). Being made in God’s image makes every person’s life valuable. God expects us to relate to others in a way which does them good and not harm. In the case of Adam and Eve, we read that, “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Genesis 2:25). When humans relate to each other according to God’s ideals, no one has any cause to feel frightened or ashamed.

God’s ideal for human relationships can be summed up in one word: love. But in the Bible, love is not just a feeling, but a selfless commitment to the good of another person. Loving someone (including our children) is not primarily about making them *feel* good, but about working towards their long-term good. Our family relationships are certainly not the only arena for expressing this God-given purpose, but they usually provide a significant starting point.

### Children Are Also Made for a Purpose

The Bible is clear that no matter how young, children share our Big Purpose. God created Adam and Eve, then enabled them to create subsequent generations of people through the natural processes of conception and childbirth. But the Bible maintains that God is still intimately involved in the creation of each and every child as these biological (or even technological) processes take place. In Psalm 139, the writer takes comfort from the fact that he is made and known by God:

For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE: SEEKING MORE THAN HAPPINESS

My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place,  
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes saw my unformed body;  
all the days ordained for me were written in your book  
before one of them came to be. (Psalm 139:13-16)

God knows every child, even in the womb, and has a plan for his or her life. This is what God said to one young person, the prophet Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5).

All people, including children, are made to honor God and love other people. One Bible writer spells this out in his prayer to God, saying, “From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise” (Psalm 8:2). There are also many instances in the Bible where children are the “heroes”—the ones who demonstrate a love for God and other people—often to the shame of the adults around them. Some examples are Samuel (1 Samuel 3), Naaman’s servant girl (2 Kings 5:1-15), the young David (1 Samuel 17), and King Josiah (2 Kings 22). Being young does not disqualify children from living out their big purpose in the world.

### But What about Happiness?

We have seen that God did not make humans *primarily* to be happy, but rather to rule creation, to honor him, and to love others. However, God promises that living out our Big Purpose will, in turn, bring us great satisfaction.

The book of Ecclesiastes follows one man’s search for meaning in life. He tries to find meaning and satisfaction in everything—study, wealth, hard work, and pleasure. But he realizes that all of those things are “meaningless” in themselves, because they do not last. Everyone—wise or foolish, rich or poor—dies in the end. He concludes:

Now all has been heard;  
here is the conclusion of the matter:  
Fear God and keep his commandments,  
for this is the duty of all mankind. (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

PART 1: OUR BIG PURPOSE

Honoring God and keeping his commands (including his command to love others) is what gives meaning to all that we do. Elsewhere, the writer puts it like this:

A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26)

Without reference to God, our search for happiness will only end in frustration. But when we live our lives to his glory, we will find true meaning and satisfaction. Israel's most famous King, David, put it this way:

Trust in the Lord and do good;  
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.  
Take delight in the Lord,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37:1-4)

We live in a world which urges us to chase after the things that make us feel good. As parents, we want to protect our children from feeling unhappy. But current research confirms what the Bible has been saying all along—that happiness makes a wonderful long-term by-product, but an impossible short-term goal.

Realizing that I could not make my children happy shook the very foundations of my parenting. It forced me to step back and see the bigger picture. We and our children were made for more than happiness—we were made to be in relationship with God, his creation, and each other. Parenting is not about helping my children to *feel* good, but to *do* the good that they were created to do. And ironically, doing this—giving my children a sense of purpose and connection to God, creation, and others—is actually the best way to help them find lasting happiness.