

Out of the Ordinary by David Roper, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Discovery House Publishers, 2003 (18 Quotes compiled by Doug Nichols)

1. A Friend of Souls

I cannot strengthen feeble hands, nor can I straighten knees that have given way, but I can bring weary travelers to the One who can. His bread offers endurance, strength, and eternal consolation. His wine gladdens and sustains the heart.

I cannot undo the cruel or dreary circumstances of anyone's journey, nor can I take away their travail, but I can remind those who trudge by that there is One who walks with them-who holds them with His right hand, who guides them with His counsel, and afterward will take them into glory.

I cannot help the helpless, but I can love them, pray with them, and bring them to the throne of grace to find help in time of need. I cannot show them the way, but I can "show them God,
as theologian John Piper says.

This is my blessing. [Page 11]

2. A Defective Leader

I read somewhere that a Huey Cobra helicopter, practicing auto rotations during a military night-training exercise, landed on its tail rotor, separating the tail boom from the rest of the aircraft. Fortunately, the aircraft wound up on its skids, sliding down the runway doing 360s in a shower of sparks. As the Cobra passed the tower, the following exchange occurred:

Tower: "Sir, do you need assistance?"

Cobra: "I don't know, tower. We ain't done crashin' yet!"

As I look at my life and leadership over the years, I have to admit that much of it has been one resounding crack-up after another. My best-laid schemes have crashed and burned, my brilliant strategies have augured in, and I "ain't done crashin' yet."

Yet God wastes nothing-not even failure. He discerns the possibilities in every humiliating debacle and uses them to make us better leaders than we ever thought possible.

God's ways are not our ways: We equate leadership with lordship; He equates it with servanthood. We seek power so we can set things right; He strips us of importance so He can do a better job.

We want strength so we can help God get on with His work; He weakens us and reveals our ineptitude so He can get us out of the way. We advertise our credentials so others can be sure of us; He lets our assets fail us so others see that apart from God we can do nothing.

Conventional wisdom contends that weakness is a hindrance. We must be strong and able. But in spiritual matters, flaws and frailties are valuable leadership traits. For one thing they help others count less on our leadership and make them more dependent on God to find their way. [Pages18-19]

3. Not Caring for Credit

There's no end of the good you can do if you don't care who gets the credit for it.—
Coach John Wooden [Page 29]

4. Little souls are addicted to their own significance.

They're annoyed when others gain prominence, for they, like Diotrophes, "love to be first" (3 John 9). They seek greatness for themselves, though in time this always has the opposite effect. [Page 29]

5. Caring More for God's Work than Ours.

"Let us know how to sit, as well as how to rise," wrote John Wesley, "and let it comfort our declining days to trace, in those who are likely to succeed us in our work, the openings of yet greater usefulness."

This spirit can only grow in us as we are taken into God's great heart and see His passion to be glorified in all His saints (2 Thessalonians 1:10). There we learn to care more for His work than for our own.

If I would do great things, John reminds me: "I must decrease" (John 3:30 NASB).
[Page 30]

6. Double Trouble

The writer of Hebrews warns us: "See to it that ... no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" (Hebrews 12:15). This metaphor—a "bitter [lethal] root"—is drawn from the words of Moses: "Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe

among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God ... make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison" (Deuteronomy 29:18).

The bitter root is a heart that has turned away from the Lord. Like a poisonous plant that finds its way into a family meal, it imperils everyone at the table. Our transgressions can bring death and destruction to our household. [Page 43]

7. Payday Someday

We see cruel tyrants everywhere getting away with appalling evil, and we wonder if anyone is minding the store. That's because we see only one side of God-His tender mercy and longsuffering patience. He waits, not willing that any should perish. But His tolerance is not the whole story.

Psalms 73 makes the same point. The poet was having a hard time with God, who allowed evil men and women to run amok in His world (Psalm 73:1-12). He struggled with God's injustice until he entered the sanctuary, the place of revelation. There he saw the "final destiny" of the wicked.

"Surely you place them on slippery ground;
you cast them down to ruin.
How suddenly are they destroyed,
completely swept away by terrors!
As a dream when one awakes,
so when you arise, O Lord,
you will despise them as fantasies" (Psalm 73:18-20).

Evil men and women are on a slippery slope to the grave. There, they will be swept away and "cast down to ruin."

"Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). All things considered, it's a very fair world. [Page 50]

8. A Wandering One

They felt good eyes upon them and shrunk within-undone; good parents had good children and they-a wandering one. -RUTH BELL GRAHAM

WARM-UP: Judges 13.2-21

Manoah prayed to the Lord: "Teach us how to bring up boy who is to be born" (Judges 13:8). This is the earnest and often anxious prayer of every godly parent.

The boy was Samson, Israel's prankish Hercules, who squandered his God-given strength. One wonders how often Manoah and his wife awakened in the dark, sleepless hours of the night asked themselves, "Where did we go wrong?"

When our children make bad choices-when they abuse alcohol, do drugs, get pregnant out of wedlock, drop out of school turn their backs on God and family-we ask ourselves the same question. We blame ourselves and see our children as the tragic victims of our ineptitude.

There is, however, no absolute correlation between the ways we parent and the way our children turn out. Good parenting makes a difference, but it does not guarantee that the product of that parenting will be good.

We all are acquainted with families where neglect, violence and substance abuse are the norm, yet the children turn remarkably well. They have good friends; they do well in school they hold good jobs; they end up in stable marriages, and handle their own parental responsibilities with wisdom and love. And we all are familiar with families where the parents are warm, nurturing, kind, firm, wise, and giving-and yet there's at least one prodigal in the family and sometimes more than one.

Despite our best efforts, our children may go wrong.

But, you say, what about the proverb: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Proverbs 22:6)? That sounds very much like a guarantee.

We must remember, however, that the biblical proverbs are not promises, but premises--general rules or axioms. Proverbs 22:6 is a statement of general truth, much like our contemporary saying: "As the twig is bent so the tree is inclined." A proverb is a saying that sets forth a truth that is applicable in most cases, but there are always exceptions to the rule.

Why these exceptions? Because children are not mindless matter that we can shape at will. They are autonomous individuals who may, with the best of parenting, choose to go their own way. Even God, the perfect parent, has always had trouble with His children-Adam and Eve to name two. (You and me to name two more.) If we believe that by applying certain techniques and rules we can secure godly behavior in our children, we may be in for bitter disillusionment and heartache. No one can determine nor can they predict what their offspring will do.

It was Joaquin Andujar, poet and pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals, who said you can sum up baseball in one word: "You never know" His word count was off, but he captured the essence of life as well as baseball.

Given that uncertainty, the question is not "How can I produce godly children?" but rather, "How can I be a godly parent?" The two questions may appear to be the same, but they're not. The first has to do with result, over which we have no control; the second with process, over which we do, by God's grace, have some measure of control.

If our focus is on process, then the questions are about us: How can I deal with my impatience, temper and rage, my selfishness, my resentment, my stubbornness, my defensiveness, my pride, my laziness, my unwillingness to listen? How can I deal with my addictions? How can I strengthen my marriage? How can I develop my parenting skills? How can I build bridges of grace, forgiveness, and acceptance that will make it possible for my prodigal to come home?

These are the matters that must occupy us as parents ... and then we must leave the results with God. ¹²

Ruth Bell Graham expresses it well:

Lord, I will straighten all I can and You
take over what we mothers cannot do. [Pages 51-53]

9. The Man of Shame

"He us eternal" Augustine said, "therefore His love endures forever." [Page 69]

10. Legacy

...a friend of mine gave me a test the other day. He asked me to name:

- the five wealthiest men in the world
- the last four Heisman trophy winners
- the last three winners of the Miss America contest
- the names of two people who have won a Nobel or Pulitzer prize
- any one of last year's Oscar winners

Then he asked me to name

- the person who brought me to faith
- two people who have wept and walked with me through dark days
- three teachers who have stirred me to love God's Word
- four friends who have touched me with unconditional love
- five men and women whose godliness has caused me to hunger for God

These are the righteous who "will be remembered forever" (Psalm 112:6). Theirs is the fruit that *remains*. [Page 81]

11. Try, Try, Try Again

“No amount of falls can really undo us,” C.S. Lewis wrote, “if we keep picking ourselves up each time. We shall, of course, be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home.... The only fatal thing is to lose one’s temper and give up.” [Pages 94-95]

12. Curtain Call

Bildad bored in: "If you [Job] were really pure and upright, God would deliver and restore you." Put as a premise: "Goodness and the good life go together."

Bad premise, bad manners, for, as Job wailed, "A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends" (6:14). All Job got, however, was an explanation. Cold comfort to a man who had endured so much pain.

I'm always a bit uneasy around those sincere but all-too-certain folks who can explain everything that comes my way. Their wisdom is proper and theologically familiar, but their explanations, though well-meant, only make me more miserable. I'm more comfortable with those who say, "I'm not sure why you're suffering, but I'll wait here with you and pray." Folks like that are a pure benediction!

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and theologian, once pointed out that human beings are like schoolchildren who want to steal the teacher's answers before a math exam so they don't have to work through the problems. In Job's case, however, there were no answers to steal, at least no earthly answers. His explanation awaited in heaven, where God would supply the reasons behind all he'd suffered. In the meantime he had to rest in the knowledge that there's more to life than he could ever know in this world. [Page 98]

13. Learning to Listen

Listening is a lost art these days. We don't listen well and we aren't used to being listened to. Most of our words simply fall to the ground.

I have a friend who, when he goes to noisy parties and people ask how he's doing, on occasion has replied quietly, "My business went belly-up this week, the bank foreclosed on my house, my wife left me, and I have terminal cancer." "Wonderful!" one man murmured, as he pumped my friend's hand and moved on. I keep wondering if I've done the same thing to others in other ways.

Here are some things I'm learning about listening:

- When I'm thinking about an answer while others are talking- I'm not listening.
- When I give unsolicited advice-I'm not listening.
- When I suggest they shouldn't feel the way they do-I'm not listening.
- When I apply a quick fix to their problem- I'm not listening.
- When I fail to acknowledge their feelings- I'm not listening.
- When I fidget, glance at my watch, and appear to be rushed-I'm not listening.
- When I fail to maintain eye contact- I'm not listening
- When I don't ask follow-up questions- I'm not listening
- When I top their story with a bigger, better story of my own-I'm not listening.
- When they share a difficult experience and I counter with one of my own-I'm not listening.

Listening is hard work and most of us are unwilling to put in the time, and *time* is required. Listening means setting aside own timetable and tendency to hurry on to our next destination. It means settling into a relaxed, unhurried, leisurely pace. "Only the ambience of leisure," Eugene Peterson writes, "do persons know they are listened to with absolute seriousness, treated with a dignity and importance." [Pages 102-103]

14. The Man Who Lived Too Long

Better to live well than to live long- Lucius Seneca (4 B.C.- A.D 65) [Page 108]

15. Keep on Keeping on

There's nothing wrong with retiring and setting a slower pace for oneself, but retirement is not the chief end of man. We must grow, mature, serve, minister, mentor, venture ourselves to the end of our days.

You may have heard of John Steven Akhwari, the runner from Tanzania who finished last in the marathon at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. No last-place finisher in a marathon ever finished quite so last.

Injured along the way, he hobbled into the stadium over an hour after the last runner had crossed the finish line. All the spectators were gone, the stadium was closed, and crews were preparing for the closing ceremony when Akhwari gathered himself for a final effort and *sprinted* across the line. (I'm told that one of the workers picked up a torn finishing tape and held it across the track so Akhwari could break it.)

When Bud Greenspan, the official filmmaker of the games, asked the weary athlete why he put himself through such pain, Akhwari replied, "Mr. Greenspan, my country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race. They sent me to *finish* it." [Page 109]

16. The Tongue of a Learner

I sit down alone.
Only God is here.
In His presence I open,
I read His book;
And what I thus learn.
I speak.

-John Wesley [Page 111]

17. Exactly Right

Jeanne Guyon, a seventeenth-century woman, learned Mary's words. At age sixteen, Jeanne was forced into an arranged marriage with an invalid forty years older than she. She found her marriage to be a place of utter humiliation. Her husband was an angry melancholic. Her mother-in-law was a merciless critic. Even her servant girl despised her. Despite her best attempts at devotion to her husband and family, Madame Guyon found herself subject to relentless criticism and hostility.

Forbidden by her husband to go to church, she sought God in His Word and worshiped Him in secret. Alone with God, she learned that each situation before her was, as she put it, "exactly right," and thus, despite her dreary circumstances, she was "perfectly fine-within the safe hands of God."

She writes, "Here is a true spiritual principle that the Lord will not deny: God gives us the cross and the cross gives us God... Abandonment [to His cross] is the key to the inward spiritual life. It is the key to fathomless depths."³⁵

18. Growing Old with God

Growing old, as they say, is not for sissies. Aging is often accompanied and overclouded by both physical and personal losses-separation and bereavement, physical and mental decline. These blows can fall on us at any time, but they seem to fall heaviest in our latter years. None of us can shield ourselves from these difficulties or physical infirmities, but we can do our best to ensure that our senior years will be happy and productive, years of growth in grace and beauty rather than years of boredom and futility. The secret is developing the inward life of the soul.

Age breaks down our strength and energy, but it also strips us of our busyness so we have more time to develop intimacy with God. Far from frustrating God's best in us, the weakness and limitations of age enable us to grow to full maturity. The culmination of

the process is body and spirit united-one in loving God and others. Without the limitations of old age we might never make the most of our lives. [Page 134]

NOTES

12. I am greatly indebted to Dr. John White and his book *Parents in Pain* for some of the ideas in this essay

35. From *Experiencing the Depths of Christ Jesus*