

Introduction

You hear his little feet stomping up the wooden porch steps fast as they can go on a summer's afternoon. You yell, "Don't slam the screen d—" *SLAM!*

"Mom! Mom!" he hollers, so out of breath he can hardly get the words out. *Why are boys are so loud?* you think. You hand him a glass of water, and he attempts to drink and tell his oh-so-important story at the same time.

"Mom—*GULP*—I—*GULP*—saw—*GULP, PANT, PANT*—the most—*GULP*—biggest—*GULP, PANT, PANT . . .*"

You smile at him and gently push the hair from his eyes, lovingly studying his countenance. What you see causes your heart to melt like the chocolate bar he left on your dashboard in the hot sun. His smudged face, his dirty T-shirt, and the grass-stained knees of his jeans tell you he's been on some outrageous adventure about which you can only guess. His hair is damp with sweat, and he's got that incredible boy smell about him—one part fresh-cut grass, one part odor of dog, one part unwashed hands that have been who knows where, and one part long-lost dreams from your own childhood. You gaze at him with love, wondering what he will be like as a man.

Then with a start you think, *How am I ever going to raise this little guy into a good man?*

What makes boys so special? Is it their love of bugs, dirt, dogs, baseball, explosions, loud noises, heavy equipment, and Kool-Aid? Or is it because they don't like taking baths, being kissed, eating vegetables, or having their noses wiped and ears cleaned? To mothers, these and all the other things that make boys special can present a confusing mix of contradictions. Particularly to women who were not raised with brothers or even a father, the odors, noises, and general rambunctiousness of boys can be downright frightening, or at the very least overwhelming.

I count myself fortunate to operate a nonprofit organization called Better Dads. Better Dads is a fathering skills training program with the goal of inspiring and equipping men to be more involved in their children's lives. Through workshops and small group settings, we help men become better fathers.

Several years ago Kevin, a counselor at a local school district, approached me and said that his elementary schools had a number of single mothers with questions about raising boys. He asked if I could address their needs through a seminar, and that is how my seminar, *Courageous Moms: Raising Boys to Become Good Men*, was born. The key word is *good*. Your son will become a man regardless of what you do or don't do. But your goal should be to raise a good man. And that, I think, takes some special training and skills that are becoming rare in today's culture.

While putting together the single moms seminar, I talked with a number of single mothers who had successfully raised boys to become good men. I ran my ideas by them for approval and incorporated their most successful techniques into the program. Since then, I have given numerous presentations to groups of single moms and have never failed to be touched by their earnest desire for information on how to raise their sons to be good men. I've discovered that there's much value to the old adage "It's easier to raise a boy than to fix a man."

After I started presenting the seminars, I discovered a very interesting phenomenon. Women in general, not just single moms, were very interested in learning how boys (and men) think, act, and feel and why they think, act, and feel the way they do. Married women and even those who were not yet mothers began attending the seminars.

Even though I'm a fathering advocate, I have nothing but respect and admiration for mothers, especially single mothers, who are interested in trying to help grow their sons to become good men. The horrifying truth is that 85 percent of custodial single parents are mothers. I can't begin to fathom how difficult it must be to raise and provide for a family without the support of a spouse.

It's important for you to understand that I'm not a psychiatrist, a psychologist, or even a trained counselor. I'm also not an expert father, to which my kids will readily attest. I make mistakes every day. I'm just an average parent like most of you, trying to raise my kids the best I can. I've just been fortunate to have received some extra training and to have read many good books.

Also, it's important to understand that I will be using some generalizations throughout this book. These are meant to portray characteristics men and women can relate to, not to promote stereotypes.

One thing I'm not going to tell you is how to be a mother. You're a better mother than I'll ever be. But maybe I can provide some insight into what it takes to be a man. After all, I am a man—by some accounts, a fairly good man—I've been a boy, and I've raised a pretty good son nearly into manhood. I've worked with hundreds of men over the years, learning about their childhoods and the areas they struggle with daily. That doesn't make me an expert, but hopefully, it will allow me to give you some insight into what makes us males tick.

Having said that, I dedicate this book to all the moms out there who are struggling to make it. Moms who work all day and come home and cook meals and clean the house, sometimes with little or no support from the father of their children. Moms who do without day after day so their kids can eat, have a roof over their heads, and have shoes and clothes to wear. Moms who are trying their best to raise a family on their own without the resources and support of a two-parent family. Moms who, despite the hardships, never quit.

I hope this book will ease your burden by helping you understand how boys think, how best to communicate with these strange little creatures, and how to help them become *good* men so that someday your grandchildren will look up at you and say, "Thank you, Grandma, for raising such a good daddy for me."

I

Your Place in God's Plan for Your Son

With sympathy and with reverence we greet you on the soil ennobled by the blood of your courageous sons, whose sacrifices have created a bond between us which can never be broken. The world cannot measure your tragic loss. You have suffered in silence and alone with courage and love. You have given to the Great Cause something more precious than your own life blood. And the altar of freedom is wet with your tears.

French general, speech to the American mothers who voyaged to France to visit the graves of their dead sons

In 480 BC, Greece was the hub of Western civilization. Ancient Greece was divided into separate provinces or city-states that warred among themselves. The greatest of these city-states was Sparta. The Spartans were a war-

like people who trained young men from birth in the art of war. They used strenuous techniques to train boys in self-discipline, courage, teamwork, and warfare. It was a way of life for them. Their women eschewed makeup and the frilly coverings common to other Grecian women and participated in athletic competitions, even training as warriors. Nevertheless, Spartan women were admired throughout Greece for their grace and natural beauty.

To the east, the Persian king Xerxes (whose father had lost an earlier war to Greece) had amassed an army of over three hundred thousand men. Xerxes' plan was to conquer Greece and complete his goal of worldwide domination while avenging his father's defeat. The Greeks realized they had to mobilize themselves in order to save their homeland.

The huge Persian army would be landing in eastern Greece, which provided the shortest and least dangerous crossing of the Aegean Sea. The Greeks' only chance was to stall the Persians long enough to mobilize the Greek army and quickly build up their naval fleet to arrive and engage the larger Persian navy that would be used to supply the invasion.

The Spartans stepped forward and volunteered to stall the Persian army at a narrow valley called Thermopylae, or the Hot Gates. Thermopylae was a small opening through the mountains, about sixty men wide, abutted by high, steep cliffs on both sides and the ocean at one end. The Spartan king Leonidas chose three hundred men (including himself) to defend the pass against the Persian onslaught. These three hundred men, along with several thousand allies from other provinces, held the huge Per-

sian army at bay for six days, killing a great number of the invading army.

Finally, a Greek traitor went to Xerxes and told him of a goat path through the mountains that would allow the Persians to get behind the Spartans. Xerxes sent ten thousand of his Immortals (royal guards) across the mountains. When Leonidas found out he had been betrayed, he sent the allied forces home to defend their homes and cities. Leonidas and the remainder of the three hundred Spartans made a last stand in a circle upon a hillside. They were slain to the last man, but they delayed the Persian army long enough for their allies to escape safely.

The Spartans' bravery allowed the Greek army time to mobilize and the Greek fleet time to arrive and engage the Persian navy. Their heroism inspired the Greeks to victory over the much larger invading force.

So what does that story have to do with you as the mother of a son?

Shortly before the battle at Thermopylae, Leonidas was secretly asked how he had chosen the three hundred brave men for the suicide mission to defend the Hot Gates. After all, the men appeared to be an eclectic mix of odd choices—grizzled veterans of many campaigns alongside young men unbloodied in battle. To die for your city was the greatest privilege a Spartan could achieve, and all warriors wanted the honor. Did he pick the bravest men, the best fighters, the greatest Olympic athletes? Or did he choose the fastest, strongest, and wisest men he could find?

Leonidas stated that none of those traits factored into how he chose the three hundred. Instead, he chose them based on the character of their wives and mothers. He

reasoned that Thermopylae would not be the deciding battle of the war—that would come later on the plains of Greece. Since all the men at Thermopylae were destined to be killed, their wives and mothers would be left for the rest of Greece to see. If these women were broken by the loss of their husbands and sons, then the Greeks would lose heart and fail to defend their homeland. But if these women exhibited courage and strength, then the Grecian peoples would be inspired and win the war. Leonidas said, “These brave women are to be the new Mothers of Greece. All of the people will be inspired by their dry-eyed example of courage and sacrifice.”¹ Apparently, these extraordinary women performed up to his expectations.

The Spartan moms saw the bigger picture and were willing to sacrifice their own feelings and loved ones for the well-being of their nation. They raised up sons who would fulfill the destiny of their times and would be remembered twenty-five hundred years later. Each of us, men and women, has a destiny from God to fulfill. In the greatest maternal sacrifice in history, Mary had to watch the gruesome torture and crucifixion of her son Jesus as part of God’s plan for the eternal salvation of humankind. Part of your calling is to raise up your son to fulfill God’s plan for him.

The Bible urges, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). *Train up* means “to dedicate,” which includes stimulating the child to do good through guidance, discipline, and encouragement. A parent’s main task is to receive a child as a charge from the Lord and then to dedicate the child to God’s ways.

Numerous examples are given throughout the Bible of women who inspired their sons to be the men God wanted them to be. The Bible urges you to do this boldly and courageously without intimidation. Training up your boys to be bold will require you to be bold and courageous as well.

As a mother, you hold the fate of the world in your hands. Men are currently abdicating their roles as leaders in their homes, their communities, and their country in record numbers. This is creating a crisis that is threatening to dissolve the very fabric of society, destroying our country and possibly even the world. Men in our country are mired in apathy and passivity. The reason? They are not being brought up to relish their God-given role as protector of and provider for their families.

Men who do relish this role stand in the gap between a life filled with God's blessings and the total moral decay and collapse of our civilization.

As a mother, you have the ability, even the responsibility, to ensure that your son is raised up to be a man who will lead with courage and integrity. That's a huge responsibility but one that women have been charged with since the beginning of time.

Mothers have sacrificed their sons, both literally and figuratively, for the greater good of society throughout history. As a mother, do you think you're not important? Think again. The power of a mother's influence is like a steady river carving canyons through the landscape of history. The legacy you leave as the teacher and nurturer of the next generation of men is valuable beyond description. The Spartan moms' story is just one example that

shows the importance of mothers in the lives of men and in shaping the history of civilization.

God's Plan for Your Son

A house means a family house, a place specially meant for putting children and men in so as to restrict their waywardness and distract them from the longing for adventure and escape they've had since time began.

Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities*

We were created for the incredible adventure of changing the world through Jesus Christ. We intuitively know it; we just don't always consciously understand it. All of us long for significance in our very souls, for something greater than individual success, material goods, sexual conquests, and even power.

Don't believe me? Then why are so many famous people unhappy even though they are talented, rich, and powerful? We hear every day about famous people battling with drug and alcohol addictions, marital troubles, and sexual infidelity. What's going on? Don't fame and fortune provide us with all the happiness we require? Why do we continue to struggle and want more and more even after achieving what the world considers success? Call it thirst and hunger for the truth—for significance in our lives. We all long for significance, especially men. That's why boys have big dreams of adventures and heroic deeds.

John Eldredge in *Wild at Heart* talks about the fact that every man needs a journey to take, a dragon to slay, and a damsel to rescue. He contends that most men in our country

are “soft men.” They’re passive, indecisive, and apathetic. Our culture and even the church have feminized men to the point where our greatest ambition is just to be a “nice guy.”²

Is this true? Has society softened men? I believe it has. Why? Because unfortunately, men today seem more moved by their emotions or by cultural mores than by their principles. We don’t want to be labeled as intolerant or judgmental, or even be ostracized as politically incorrect. We fold under the scrutiny of public opinion—of whatever the television and newspaper tell us. Couple that with the lack of positive male role models in many homes and it’s no wonder boys don’t grow up knowing how to act like men.

Most men think they’re simply here on earth to kill time, and frankly, it’s killing them. Men are angry and don’t even know why.³ Henry David Thoreau said, “Most men live lives of quiet desperation.” I sense that desperation in many of the men I meet.

Eldredge maintains that men tend to pick only the battles they’re sure to win, attempt only those adventures they can handle, and pursue only those women they’re sure to conquer.⁴ I remember as a young man being secretly entranced by a beautiful young lady, but she was too beautiful and too popular, so I never even tried to risk chasing after her. I thought, *There is no way she would ever be interested in someone like me.* However, God wants us to stretch and reach for the impossible—to take risks. Our faith, submission to him, and willingness to be used by him enable us to achieve greatness in his name.

I realize as I look back on most of my life that my decisions and choices were governed by a fear of failure. I

never risked doing anything great for fear of failure or loss of face. Mel Gibson, as William Wallace, said in the movie *Braveheart*, "All men die; not every man really lives." I don't believe you can ever really live if you don't risk failure by attempting to do great things. That's what makes life worth living, and God blesses a man's honorable endeavors.

God created men to be passionate and fierce and noble. We have a spiritual longing for adventure, for a battle to fight that's bigger than ourselves, for significance in our lives.⁵ We can feel that longing in our souls. Something is missing from our lives. We men long to be dangerous, to do things that make us and others uncomfortable, to tackle insurmountable odds, and to change the world. That attitude scares a passive world. That's why they want to soften us. Our culture considers Christian men who are not passive or complacent to be dangerous. But that is exactly how God wants men to be known.

We need women to be Spartan mothers. To raise up spiritual warriors who will go out and fulfill God's destiny for them of changing the world—to make a difference, to be significant. To inflame the passions God put in your boy so that he might fulfill his destiny as a man. The fact that men are abandoning their families in droves is destroying our country. I'm convinced that fatherlessness is directly or indirectly the cause of nearly every problem we face as a society today. We must stop this plague before our culture disappears like ancient Greece. I work with many men in an attempt to change this trend, but I believe it may be too late to reverse this epidemic in our generation. The only way to stop it is to raise up the current generation of boys to be brave-hearted stalwarts of virtue and character.

Our world desperately needs Spartan moms at a time such as this. This book will help you meet the challenge of raising your son to be a *good* man. It will give you direction to steer your son to become a man of character, a man who lives a life of significance, creating a better world in which to live. A man of destiny, loving and encouraging his wife as Jesus loves the church and raising his children with the calming wisdom and grace of our heavenly Father.

This book will challenge you and may even make you angry from time to time. That does not make the wisdom in it any less true. My hope is that you learn as much and have as much fun reading this book as I did writing it.

I wish you all God's blessings on the incredible journey you're about to undertake.

Questions for Discussion

1. Are you prepared to be a Spartan mom? Would you be willing to sacrifice your son (literally or figuratively) to a cause greater than himself? If not, what do you think is holding you back?
2. Do you agree with the author's assertion that we were created for the incredible adventure of changing the world through Christ? Why or why not?
3. Discuss with another woman or with your group how men's character can be a factor either for creating a better world for women and children or for leaving a legacy of hopelessness.