

Addressing the Problems of Rebellious Children



By Mary Somerville

Sometimes the ministry home can stoke the fires of rebellion in a child's heart. Even though you may saturate your family with all the resources you have in Christ, you may see your child make wrong choices and take the path of rebellion. This is the hardest thing for parents to go through! It is agonizing to see a child for whom you've prayed, in whom you've delighted, and to whom you've given your life, turn away from Christ. Dear friend, I want to look at this issue with you. I will speak from a very personal perspective as a parent of a rebellious child.¹ I pray you'll be encouraged through the wisdom found in God's Word and by seeing God's faithfulness to our family.

I have our son's permission to relate his story.

Daniel's rebellion began in junior high school. Our son, who had formerly had a tender heart toward the Lord, became completely cold toward God. He was not interested in going to church because he found no friends there. He felt that people still looked at him as a little boy. He was not sure that the faith he had as a child

was valid for a young person seeking independence.

Daniel's rebellion heightened in high school and the gulf widened between us. His non-Christian friends took precedence over our family. Their influence dominated his behavior. He had no interest in studying and his grades went down. He pretended to respect authority but did his best to get away from it. His lifestyle could only be characterized as godless.

Daniel worked very hard at a part-time job. This had both positive and negative consequences. One negative was that it gave him money to buy marijuana. We knew that our son was using marijuana. We saw the symptoms. Of course, we warned him about the physical consequences of the drug and appealed to his conscience, but to no avail. We told him that if we ever found it in his room we would call the police. One day we followed through on our threat. Daniel was taken away from our house in handcuffs for possession of marijuana. It was heartbreaking to see him headed down the path of destruction and death! In all of his inner rebellion, he never spoke unkindly to us. It was a quiet rebellion. Those darkest days of our married life lasted five years.

God used a hard experience in Daniel's life to bring him to see where his life was headed and to show him that God does discipline His children. These are his own words:

I truly began to fear the Lord when I had

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been disciplined by Him, and only Him. I had been reading through the Old Testament (an assignment in a college class) at the time. The Israelites did what was right in their own eyes and God killed thousands. I knew that I was doing much worse things than grumbling and complaining. I knew that if God didn't discipline me or if I didn't respond, then I wasn't His. I decided to seek out Jesus. I knew He was giving me a second chance.

It was hard to see Daniel be disciplined by God, but He did His work and brought Daniel to repentance. Daniel turned his life completely over to Jesus Christ, to serve Him with all of his heart and soul. Soon, he began sharing the good news with others.

In looking back, Daniel sees how God now

me of the tree, a great oak, firmly planted by streams of water.

I love you Mom and Dad, and am so glad that you could share in my joy.

Love, Dan

Daniel is now a high school teacher. He and his wife Tiffany are a great team, both teachers and both serving the Lord. We have fully forgiven him for his rebellious days. But even in our heartache, our love for him never abated. We love our two children equally and thank God for what He taught us in raising both of them. I relate his story because I want you to rejoice with us in His faithfulness. I want you to have hope if you are going through a child's rebellion in your life right now. I want to share principles from God's Word that we clung to during this trial in our lives.

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uses his past rebellion for good. He says, "That rebellion gives me an opportunity to relate to those going through similar struggles. And I am able to give God the glory and credit for everything that I do now. I am able to worship God and give Him my life—the most I can offer." He said, "I learned that all is vanity except to glorify the Lord." Upon his graduation from a Christian college he wrote us the following note:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I am so grateful for what you have both sacrificed to send me to college. It was the best choice I have made in my life (besides my marriage to Tiffany). I have grown in the four years I have been here more than you will ever know. I have changed into a different person. I wish I could take out or delete five years of my previous life. But God is good and He works all things to His glory, even our sin. Praise God!

I just wanted to say a huge thanks to you both for staying strong in Christ and helping me in my walk. So many believers stray from the faith, but you both remind

God is Sovereign and He Can Even Use Rebellion for His Own Glory.

Daniel got it right, "God is good and He works all things to His glory—even our sin." He can testify to his students of the emptiness of a life bent on pleasure and devoid of God. It is much easier to see this at the end of a battle rather than in the middle of it. While we are in the battle, we must keep our minds on the sovereignty of God.

Consider how God used the rebellion of our first parents for good in the Garden of Eden. He did so to demonstrate His glorious grace through the cross. We raise our children by faith in the One who entrusted them to us for a time. If you are in the midst of a child's rebellion, take heart, God has handpicked this trial in your life for His own purpose. He sovereignly works in answer to your deep prayers for His own glory.

God is in control even though you may wonder how He could be when your child is so out-of-control. God still loves your child and is at work in that child's life to bring him to repentance. It is not our job to convict of sin. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our job is to

teach the child God's law and show him God's love. Beyond that, we must pray, trust God, and wait patiently for Him to work. But there are some things you must remember as you go through your trials.

Rebellion is not your fault. You do not necessarily need to blame yourself if your child is rebellious. His actions reveal an unconverted heart or the heart of a wandering child of God. Where did all this rebellion come from? It originated in the Garden when our first parents chose to disobey God. That act infused sin into all of mankind. It isn't anything that we do or do not do that makes our children sin. Each person is responsible before God for the choices he or she makes. Scripture makes this very clear:

The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity. (Ezek. 18:20)

In the Old Testament books of Kings and Chronicles, good kings sometimes had bad children; bad kings sometimes had good children. Children can have the best homes possible in which to grow up and still choose to rebel and go their own way. Children from poor homes can choose life and love in the Lord. Even if you could be the perfect parent (and you can't be) you would have no guarantee that your children would follow Christ.

But a godly home does make a difference. Scripture makes it clear that God's usual pattern is to bless faithful parents with faithful children.

Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His loving kindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments. (Deut. 7:9)

If it happens that you have a rebellious child, it is important to evaluate your parenting. None of us can claim perfection. There is always much to learn. But Satan will have a hey day if we wallow in self-recrimination for any perceived failures in parenting. We must not get caught in a trap of hopelessness, discouragement, or depression that comes from dwelling on guilt and our failures as parents. Do not fall into the hole of

self-pity, grumbling, complaining, or wondering why God allowed this to happen. Bitterness, anger with God, and worry are counter-productive. This dishonors God. Instead attack the problem wisely through these strategies:

- Evaluate yourself. Seek God's forgiveness for your own shortcomings.
- Stay united as a couple.
- Step back from ministry, if necessary.
- Cry out to God.
- Glorify God by thanking Him for this trial by faith.

Evaluate Yourself. Seek God's Forgiveness for Your Own Shortcomings

As God's children, we have hope that the world does not even dream of. We do not have to be devastated by our failures or try to hide them and move on as if nothing had happened. We can drag them out into the light, confess them, forsake them, and begin afresh. If, after evaluating your parenting before God, you see ways you have contributed to your child's rebellion, take heart! You can fix this by the power of the Holy Spirit. Ask God to show you any sin in your life and in your relationship with your rebellious child so that you can seek forgiveness both from Him and from your child.

1. Evaluate Your House Rules and Discipline Practices

Solomon exhorts us, "Discipline your son while there is still hope, and do not desire his death" (Prov. 19:18). Ask yourself, "Have we wisely disciplined our child? Could any of his foolishness be due to our failure to discipline consistently?"

Eli was a priest who held a place of great spiritual privilege. But God judged him for his permissive parenting. He saw both of his sons die in their rebellion because he had honored his sons above God. Eli did not like their sin, but he reprimanded them ineffectively. God made it clear that he became a part of their sin when he did not rebuke them effectively (1 Sam. 2:29; 3:13).

Parents must ask many questions about their relationship with their child and their discipline practices.

- Is gaining my child's approval or friendship an idol of my heart?

- Am I seeking to please my child above God through overlooking behavior that needs to be disciplined?
- Do I faithfully set standards and carry out discipline? Or am I permissive?

These are questions that parents should ask themselves. It is never too late to ask for forgiveness and start over with proper expectations and consistent follow through. “Correct your son, and he will give you comfort; He will also delight your soul” (Prov. 29:17).

2. Draw lines of acceptable behavior biblically, not arbitrarily.

Do you exasperate your teens with too many *unbiblical* requirements? The more mature your child becomes, the more you can relax your authority structure and become a counselor or guide to your child. Teenagers need to learn to make their own decisions, especially in gray areas. Our daughter was walking with the Lord during high school so we had very few rules for

necessary to require our children to do what they do not want to do simply because it is good for them. That is not teaching hypocrisy, but duty. We required Dan to attend one church service a week as long as he was living in our home. He chose the morning worship service. That was a great choice because he heard the Word of God that does not return void. Tiffany, now his wife, came with him. She committed her life to faith in Christ as her Lord and Savior.

As Christian parents we must not endorse or sponsor ungodly or immoral behavior in our homes. If you give a rebellious child an empty house for the weekend while you’re away, or give them a car, money, or permission to pursue immorality, then you are sponsoring their wickedness. Lines must be drawn and consequences must be enforced, severely if need be. We must fear God more than we fear our children’s disapproval—otherwise, we will become like Eli. The answers are not easy. It involves much prayer, heartache, and effort to

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her. For example, she had no set curfew. But our son always pushed the limits. For him, we wrote out guidelines and the consequences for disobeying them. We gave Scripture references to support these guidelines.

Part of successful parenting is choosing your battles. Not every fad is worth a fight. God looks at issues of the heart, and so should we. Focus on the root of the problems facing your child. However, if there are certain cultural fads that you do not want your child to go along with, help him or her to see the faulty value system that underlies that fad. As they see how that particular value system conflicts with Scripture, they will understand that your rules are not arbitrary. But when an issue is negotiable, allow your teenager to make his or her own decisions.

A father or mother can’t legislate righteousness. It comes from within. But it is necessary to put the forms in place. Correct habits develop when the heart is right. It is often

evangelize them through God’s Word and our own example and words.

If the child is a believer, you must help him apply Romans 12:1-2. We are to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to God. We are not to be conformed to the world’s mold. Anything that contributes to the deeds of the flesh fit into the world’s mold (Gal. 5:19). The ultimate test for any activity is, Can I do this for God’s glory? Ask your child these questions:

- Do the lyrics of this song contribute to dissension and despair? Or do they contribute to peace and joy?
- Can I watch this movie or program on television; read this magazine; have this poster on my wall, or listen to this music for God’s glory (1 Cor. 10:31)?

Help your children evaluate their lifestyle by asking them good questions. List out ten to fifteen questions of this nature. Explain to your child that if he doesn’t make wise choices, you

will have to make them for him because it is your conviction that the things going on in your home must all be to God's glory—even in his bedroom. Eli can be cited as an example, who was guilty and judged by God for not restraining his children. You don't want God to have to judge you.

3. Evaluate Your Own Example of Humility and Love

Consider the kind of example you set for your child. Teenagers quickly see through hypocrisy. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I modeled a vital relationship with Jesus Christ for my child?
- Do I seek to be what God wants me to be in the home?
- Do I discipline myself for the purpose of godliness?
- Do I share what God is doing in my life?
- Have I spent enough time with my child? Or have I been too busy with other activities or ministries?
- Do I have time for play as well as serious activity?
- Do I make time to listen to my child?

When our son was going through his rebellion, we sought ways to spend time with him even though he was retreating from us. We turned down any speaking engagements that would cause us to leave him alone on the weekends. My husband bought a pool table and put it in the garage. We tried to make our house the place where he would want to bring his friends to hang out. We continued to have our meals together as a family. Bob had breakfast with Dan and read from the Bible and prayed for his day.

Examine your attitudes and not just your actions. Ask yourself:

- Do I evidence the love of Christ in my home?
- Do I seek to be a servant, showing kindness and patience? Or am I easily provoked?
- Am I approachable? Or do I portray a proud attitude of never having to struggle with anything?
- Am I a loving leader in my home? Do I respect my child and give him room to fail?

- Do I preach and nag? Or do I calmly seek to open lines of communication?
- Is confrontation given in the spirit of gentleness?
- Is discipline administered in the spirit of gentleness?

When a child rebels, it is usually difficult for a parent to act in love. But love is from God and we can draw upon His supernatural love for the rebel.

4. Ask for Forgiveness

Am I humble in asking for forgiveness when I'm at fault? If there have been areas of failure in parenting, these can be admitted and corrected, and forgiveness can be sought from the Lord and your child. Ask your child for forgiveness for being too harsh or too permissive. Name your failures specifically. Don't worry that you will be pointing out something that he has not already noticed. Your child may not want to forgive you right away for any of the sins mentioned above. You can wait and just seek to be what God would have you to be. Pray for the softening of his heart and at the same time model a forgiving attitude. Your child may need to see this new attitude or behavior over a period of time.

Your child sees you change in some of these areas. God uses this visible change in you to soften your child's heart. But these changes in yourself need to be made first and foremost to please God, not to get your child to change. As we learned from Eli, it is God who we first dishonor when we fail in our parenting. He is the One who forgives us and He is the One who draws our children to repentance as well.

Stay United as a Couple

Satan desires to use heart-breaking situations in your family to destroy your marriage. Here is a question for you. Would you jeopardize your marriage to get your child back? Sometimes we attack our husbands for the way they deal with the situation. But be careful. Don't cater to or be over-protective of your rebellious child. Rather submit to your husband's leadership in the home. The situation might require a tougher stance than you would want to take. God has placed your husband at the head of the home and it is his responsibility

to lead in this very emotional and trying circumstance.

Privately and appropriately share your thoughts and insights about the situation with your husband, but then step back and allow him to direct your child. Give him your wholehearted support. The rebel needs to see a united front. If we negate our husband's discipline or directive, a rebel will use this to avoid further correction or to draw the attention off of him and onto the problem you have with each other. If you argue with each other over these matters, you aid the enemy.

Never let your wayward child come before your husband. In some situations, the child saps all your emotional energy and response, leaving nothing for your husband—your first priority. It is so easy for a trial like this to take the joy from

was in rebellion, Bob told Daniel that he was ready to step back from ministry if he did choose not to come back to Christ. He then went to the elders and told them that in obedience to the Scriptures just quoted, he would step back from his role as their pastor and teacher if they would so direct him. After discussing the matter and seeking God's will, the elders concluded that Bob was doing all in his power to have his child in submission under him. He was setting godly standards in the home and carrying out discipline when those standards were violated. Daniel was considered to be an adult who was making his own decisions. He was responsible for his own actions. As far as they were concerned, Bob was above reproach. But if Daniel had a reputation for overt rebellion and dissipation (Titus 1:6), and there was any doubt

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your life and marriage. If that happens, it is crucial that you turn to Christ first, then to your husband. Let the rebellious one see your joy in the Lord and love for your husband.

Step Back from Ministry if Necessary

God gives a high standard for the homes of the men who lead His church. A man is only qualified for leadership if he is "above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion" (Titus 1:6). A leader must be "one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?)" (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

Have you and your husband wrestled with these passages? Are you willing to support your husband if in his conscience he knows that he is not ruling his household well and must step down from ministry? Encourage him to seek the wisdom of the elders of your church or supervisors of your ministry to know if he is still above reproach and able to lead. When Daniel

about Bob's commitment to parenting, it would have been better for Bob to step back rather than discredit the church in any way. The honor of the church and the souls of our children are worth the loss of any career.

Hiding the rebellion of your child is no way to escape from this possibility of having to step down from your ministry. Every child is born a rebel. It is our responsibility to keep them in submission and to administer the gospel to their troubled hearts. We need close friends and others in the church to pray with us for our children. They need to see us struggling for the faith of our children just as they must struggle the same for theirs. But these passages indicate that there may be a time when rebellion crosses the line and a man cannot focus on broader ministry because he has more work to do in his home.

In this case, it may be best for a man to step back for a time from ministry. If our board had decided that our son's rebellion necessitated such measures, we were ready to comply. This is a drastic consequence of the child's behavior

and may cause the young person to evaluate his life seriously. When your child sees that his or her soul is more important to you than your ministry or career, he or she will be brought face-to-face with the sacrificial love of Christ.

A parent must not support and enable his child to continue in unrepentant sin. When our son turned eighteen, we told him that we could not support his lifestyle and that he would need to move out of our house. He decided to go to college. Since he was willing to go to a Christian college and be away from his former friends and temptations, we helped him financially. We hoped that the godly environment would help bring him to repentance. Thankfully, it did.

Cry Out to God

Dealing with a rebellious child is the ideal time to cry out to the Lord. He says,

Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him?" (Joel 2:13-14)

Be broken before God. Humbly ask Him to do a purifying work in your own life and that of your precious child.

While in the midst of our son's rebellion we shed many tears. I have never wept so much in my whole life! We cried out to the Lord together as a couple. God can do "exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us" (Eph. 3:20). As we passionately and ardently bring our child before the Lord, He works on the heart, mind, will, and the ability to act.

My husband made a list of forty verses from Proverbs that he prayed for Daniel over the years of his rebellion. We have seen many, many specific answers to those prayers. Pray according to the Scriptures. As we pray according to His will, He promises to answer (1 John 5:14-15). As you and your husband pray together for wisdom to deal with this trial, God will give you insights on how best to love and discipline this child. This will draw you and your

husband closer to the Lord and to each other. Never lose heart nor give up on your child. Keep praying and beseeching God to work. "Weeping may endure for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:5).

Monica, the devout mother of Augustine, persisted in prayer for over thirty years while her son followed an evil and deluded lifestyle. Augustine writes of his mother,

While I was yet walking in sin, often attempting to rise, and sinking still deeper, my dear mother in vigorous hope, persisted in earnest prayer for me. There was a time coming when Thou wouldst wipe away my mother's tears, with which she watered the earth and forgive this my base undutifulness.²

Augustine wasn't the only one who noticed her tears. A certain bishop assured her, "It is impossible that the child of such tears should perish." Augustine was dramatically saved and greatly used by God as a bishop for forty years in the early church.³

Whether or not your child comes back to God in repentance and faith, God is still worthy of all your love and devotion. As Job said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). But God is not obligated to answer our prayers. We have to always pray, "Your will be done." Then leave the answers with Him.

Thank God for this Trial

From a human perspective, this sounds ridiculous. Yet, God is in this trial and He is in it for good, to bring glory to Himself. As you and I thank Him by faith—that brings glory to Him. Look at James, chapter one:

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach and it will be given to him" (James 1:2-5).

When you thank God for your trial, you release the trying circumstance from your own

shoulders. You ask God to work in the situation. God wants to mold you more into the likeness of His Son through this trial (Rom. 8:29). He wants to produce the fruit of the Spirit in you to make you more like Christ. Examine your life in that light. How can you learn more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control through this trial? Think about each thing that happens.

What will my son's lack of interest in spiritual things help me to learn? I can learn patience to trust God to work in his heart. What fruit can God produce in my life through my response to my teen daughter's pregnancy? I can experience and show love, self-control, and peace which passes understanding in the face of a terribly hard situation. What can my son's use of drugs teach me? I can learn peace in the midst of a heartbreaking situation. What can my daughter's unkindness to me produce in my life as I rely on the Holy Spirit? It can produce kindness and gentleness.

God puts us through the crucible to produce the best fruit in our lives. When things are going smoothly it is easy to be kind and loving and gentle. In those times we don't grow as much as when we suffer. This process of sanctification is painful. It hurts to have our rough edges sanded away, but as we yield to the Holy Spirit, He supernaturally produces the fruit in our life. We can thank God for the fruits of our suffering.

I have been amazed at how God has used the trial of our son's rebellion to enhance our ministry. One woman in our church said that they were thankful that we had a rebellious son.

It gave them help and hope for ministry in their own daughter's rebellion. We could understand and empathize with them for what they were going through.

As we live in the midst of a sinful world system, we constantly fight the world, the flesh, and the devil. Our children can be drawn away from Christ and the life He came to give. But God has left us with spiritual weapons to join Him in the fight for their souls. First, we allow the sword of the Spirit to cut to the quick and deliver us from any sinful habits in our parenting. Then as we receive forgiveness, we step out with renewed strength and unity as a couple to wage war for the souls of our children. There is no cost too great. We are willing to give up our ministry and career. We cry out to God with specific, persevering prayer. We give thanks for our trials knowing that our sovereign God, who can bring the dead to life, can also bring a harvest of joy from the tears that we have sown.⁴

¹ I write as a wife of a pastor in ministry. These principles apply widely, to husbands, to single parents, and others.

² Quoted in Jabez Burns, *Mothers of the Wise and Good* (Vestavia Hills, Alabama: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2001), 15-17.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ Mary Somerville, "Counseling Mothers of Rebellious Teens" in Elyse Fitzpatrick and Carol Cornish, editors, *Women Helping Women* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1997).