

A MODEL HELPS US BUILD OUR HOUSE

READ CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHIES

I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion. I eagerly sought occasion, sometimes to my own hazard and hurt. One natural consequence of this was a loss of favor with my new captain.... Besides, I had a little of that unlucky wit which can multiply troubles and enemies to its possessor....But let me not fail to praise that grace which could pardon, that blood which could expiate, such sins as mine... I, who was the willing slave of every evil, possessed with a legion of unclean spirits, have been spared and saved, and changed, to stand as a monument of His almighty power forever. (John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, (Kregel Publications, p. 42)

His sinful attitude not only led to a bad relationship with his ship's captain but eventually landed John Newton into virtual slavery to a slave-trader in Africa where even his deliverance from that did not turn him to God! He went on to become a commercial ship's captain making his money transporting people from Africa to be sold as slaves. But, eventually, he could write, "Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me!" a hymn still popular today. His life has indeed become a memorial to God's unmerited favor in saving sinners. After all, the Holy Spirit does not come to bring the pure and right to repentance, but sinners like John Newton or you or I. These are the kind of stories your teen needs to hear, don't you think?

OUR HEROES BECOME ROLE MODELS

Christian biography is helpful to us. It shows how people of the past applied biblical principles. We all need role models and heroes. Knowledge of how people in the past worked out the Bible can help us work it out for ourselves. If Christians become our heroes, we are more likely to follow in their footsteps. William Carey could inspire us to missionary zeal, John Newton to turning to causes of justice, William Pierce to hard work and kindness, Ann Judson to helping our husband, Charles and Susie Spurgeon to having a romantic marriage. Has your teen ever heard of any of these people? Our Christian heritage has often been sadly overlooked by our generation.

GET TEENS INTO THE PROCESS

The challenge is to get the teen to pick up the book! Be creative and individual here. Pique interest by dropping little facts or quotes by the person. Pre-teen girls might be encouraged to form a book club. Leave books around the house. Or if you've already started the family tradition of reading aloud, pick a biography. Do what you

can...

There are a lot of ways to get into biographical material. I love Letters and Journals with just a quick outline of the life enclosed. These give you a more intimate look into the person than a formal biography. Autobiographies give you opinions tucked in among the life story. They add color and a "real person" ambiance to the read. In our computer age, everyone likes short quotes instead of digging through the lengthy biography. That might be a way to perk up a story but isolated quotes don't compare to an up-close look at the person. But, since you are doing what you can, let the teen chose his preference. *Getting them into this process of looking at how others lived out their Christian values is what counts.*

Remember, all of this coaching of skills and building a spiritual house is for the purpose of godliness. Speaking of my friend and pastor, Ernest Reisinger, his biographer says,

"I have been edified by his life story, in seeing what God has been pleased to do through an imperfect man. I long for others to know it too. Let the facts speak for themselves," said Geoff Thomas.

Being built up-- made stronger by another's example and acknowledging God's grace to them-- is what reading biography is all about.

ANOTHER THINKING SKILL!

You might try mentioning in front of your pre-teen/teen how the biography you're currently reading is making you a stronger Christian or influencing you to change how you're doing things. Perhaps that will stimulate them into reading too. And, hopefully, pick up the thinking skill that asks "What can I learn from this person's experience that will make me a stronger Christian or cause me to love God more deeply?" If you've done it a lot over the years, they'll at least know that's the thinking process behind Christian biographies. Remember our visual image of a coach in not the screaming basketball coach but the kinder, gentler one who comes alongside the athlete urging and stretching them into greater fitness and skill.

SOME IMPORTANT LESSONS

There are always lessons to learn as well as thinking skills. For instance, Ernie Reisinger tells how the Sunday School he attended had him memorize some Christian facts, but forgot to point him to Christ or tell him of the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. He went on to be a "20th century pagan!" That might influence a teen to teach Sunday School or help out in Bible School with an evangelistic

message.

Another lesson might be the way they approach work and Christian duty. The following is from William Carey by Mary Drewery:

Everyone who ever worked alongside William Carey pays tribute to his dogged persistence... Certainly the young shoemaker must have required all the doggedness of which his character was capable during the years he spent in Piddington. He admitted that though he could cope with shoe-making, he was not successful at running a business. Under-nourished and constantly struggling against the persistent cough and fever that plagued him, Carey endeavoured not only to scrape a living for seven people, but also to preach and study.

How a person turns out is sometimes a big surprise. William Carey developed into a Bible translator, college professor, and missionary who took the gospel to India. His persistence and hard work are renown. "Why not find out by reading about him?" you could ask.

"Amazing Grace" is the most recorded song in history so far or at least that what I've been told. John Newton's autobiography stirred his generation and made his ministry of letter writing and preaching accessible and effective. His sailing career, his slave trading, and his dramatic conversion all attested to the grace and mercy of God.

"The Lord had now to all appearances given me up to judicial hardness; I was capable of anything. I had not the least fear of God before my eyes, nor, so far as I remember, the least sensibility of conscience. I was possessed of so strong a spirit of delusion that I believed my own lie, and was firmly persuaded that after death I should cease to be. Yet the Lord preserved me!"(from *Out of the Depths*, p. 42.)

He wrote this in 1764, twelve years before Thomas Jefferson and John Adams formulated America's plea for independence. See how it points to the biblical principle of God's all-powerful grace in our salvation, bringing hope to your teen who might be into all kinds of sin? You could "casually" mention Newton's experience when your teen's classmate or friend gets addicted to drugs or alcohol or sexual

impurity.

A lot has been written on the lives of Christian men, but not much has been done for us feminine minds. *Mrs. Robert E. Lee* by John Perry is a very valuable book because the author investigates her spiritual life. If you visit Washington, D. C., you can stand in the rooms where Robert E. and Mary Lee were engaged, raised their family, where daughter Agnes came to know the mercies of Christ. Seeing Mary Lee's garden and her slave's quarters and then reading of her Christian perseverance under great loss during the War Between the States(or the War of Northern Aggression as she would state it), personalizes the emotional side of Mary Lee's life. Mary put aside her grievances and personal losses to keep on believing and serving Christ. Mary wrote during the war to her daughter, Mildred, about turning to Christ,

"Do not be discouraged because you see so much in yourself that is vile and sinful. That is the sure work of the Holy Spirit. Before His influence was shed into your heart, you could see none of your faults. It was like coming into the parlor some cloudy morning. All the dust & litter of the room would not be visible. But let a bright ray of sunshine gleam in & how you would see every particle of dust! So the Holy Spirit has shined into your heart & you are astonished at what you see there. He shows all these defilements to you that He may cleanse them & daily you must pray for his purifying influence...

Do not doubt for a moment His power & His willingness to receive you...He will keep you safe. He will never leave you nor forsake you.

He will give you peace & joy the world knows not of."⁵(John Perry, *Mrs Robert E. Lee*,(Multnomah Publishers, Sisters, Oregon, 2001), p.239.

This could make a trip to Washington even more profitable!

Remember the goal of all of these skills is to stretch ourselves toward godliness. You might believe it was wrong of this family to own another human being, but part of profiting from history and biography is to walk in another time and another's shoes. The mark of Christ is clearly on the Lee family.

ESPECIALLY FOR GIRLS

Since so many biographies are about men, girls need to learn to pull out the spiritual lessons from the male stories. Do this again

through your casual questions; your goal is to teach them to think. Ask the right questions to do this. For instance, What were the difficulties of his life? How did he overcome them? Was his wife or mother mentioned? How did she influence him? What could you learn from their relationship?

Girls are always interested in romance. So lead them into reading about marriages of famous Christians. Teach them to scan a biography, looking through the table of contents or the index for pages revealing these intimate relationships. (Scanning is a reading skill they should have been introduced to by their junior or senior year in high school.) Scanning for this information might pique their interest in the whole story. Be sure to have them do this with *George Whitefield* by Dallimore! Scanning through men's lives can teach girls valuable lessons.

Edna Gerstner does this for us in *Jonathan and Sarah*. She gives family stories in novel form, based on the life of this foremost leader of American theology.

"Sarah promoted the wise building of her home by respecting her husband's nearly thirteen hours a day of study time and managing her eight children through the running of a disciplined household." (Edna Gerstner, *Jonathan and Sarah: An Uncommon Union*, (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, Morgan, Pa., 1995), p.v.)

Now that is a good lesson for today's young women to grasp! Mrs. Gerstner has also scanned the life of John Calvin for us and has written another novel about his wife, *Idellette*. This reading skill of scanning is very useful for us ladies!

Perhaps my favorite biography from the 1990's is Sharon James' *My Heart In His Hands* illustrating through practical stories the doctrine of God's providence in the life of Ann Judson, America's first foreign missionary.

The intensity of the spirituality of Ann Judson was matched only by the compelling drama of her story. Her courage in leaving America, her dedication in insisting that her husband remain with the young church while she sought medical help abroad, her loyalty during Adoniram's imprisonment and her disregard of personal risk seem almost superhuman. Yet she was only too human in that she suffered greatly; she was not hard, insensitive or cold. She was a woman who loved intensely, loved her husband, loved her children, loved the people of Burma, but above all loved her God. (Sharon James, *My Heart in His Hands*, (Evangelical Press,

Durham, England, 1998), p204.)

Another good source is Broadman Press's accounts of Annie Armstrong and Lottie Moon. Some of these are written with the pre-teen girl in mind. But, you get the idea. Find the story that will capture the imagination of your teen, ask the right questions to promote the right lessons and the right thinking.

BOYS NEED MEN

Besides John Newton's autobiography, another young man that might capture the imagination of your son is that of *George Whitefield* by Arnold Dallimore. Between 1737 and 1770, Whitefield made seven trips to the American colonies, preaching up and down the eastern seaboard riding horseback to do it. Boys love adventure and need models of zeal, hard work, and sacrifice. Ask the questions that will show the hardship of travel in America in those days. Why was he willing to endure such stresses? The following quote from Dallimore shows one impact of Whitefield's zeal:

When the present author is stirring at 7 in the morning, he frequently reminds himself that Whitefield had been active since 4. Arising at that early time, he spent the first hour in communion with God, reading and praying over a portion of the Scriptures, praising God and also interceding with Him for lost souls in general and for several in particular. At 5 he preached, and virtually always to a host of men and women. John Newton, the converted slavetrader, stated, 'I have seen Moorfields as full of torches at 5 in the morning as the Haymarket is on a theatre night.' And by 7 Whitefield had often set out on an evangelistic journey or was writing letters or meeting the first of the number who came seeking spiritual advice.) (Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, (Crossway Book, Westchester, Illinois, 1990), p. 196.)

Besides exposing the pre-teens/teens to quality biographies, using Bible study material to focus on a person is a good way to show them how to ask the right questions and look for character traits they could emulate. Whether you study these as a family or encourage them to study them on their own is open to your family habits. Roger Ellsworth has divided the life of David into manageable chapters with easy to pick up on biblical principles and practical lessons. For instance,

Mercy is the grandest thing in this tired old world. Mercy is showing kindness and compassion. It may be directed to those who are in desperate need and cannot help themselves.

It may be directed to those who have offended us in some way.

It is always directed to those who have no right to expect anything from us....In this passage, we have a marvelous display of mercy.

Here is Mephibosheth, the grandson of King Saul and the son of Jonathan. What a miserable figure he cuts in these verses!...

But, David, in great, generous mercy, showed kindness to him. (Roger Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King*, (Evangelical Press, Durham, England, 1998), p. 194-5.)

He then goes on to compare David's mercy with Christ's mercy to to himself, using his own experience to make real the biblical principle. This is the kind of biographical lesson our teens need to here. All in two double spaced pages!

Another book to help do this with girls is William Jay's *Lectures on Female Scripture Characters*, written in the 1850's but republished in 2004 by Sprinkle Publications. He wrote this after many years of studying and preaching with the aim of helping women to apply biblical principles by examples. He relates the story of fourteen women in the Bible, pulls out the spiritual principles and applies it. For instance, he carefully notes that any conjecture as to Mary Magdalene's being a former prostitute is just that--conjecture with no biblical basis. Then he goes on to point out her deliverance from dreadful suffering and peril. His application is that we have also been delivered and we, like Mary, should use all we have for the glory of Christ. (William Jay, *Lectures on Female Scripture Characters*, (Sprinkle Publications, Harrisonburg, Va., 2004), p. 53-56.) You would probably need to use this as a commentary, pulling out the lessons to then teach during family Bible study or pass on to your teen in a more casual setting. His warm application of biblical principles and his high regard for women make it worth your efforts. Always remember the power of examples to illustrate biblical principles.

"We must not, therefore, make the experience of others, in all respects, a rule to ourselves, nor our own a rule to others. These are common mistakes, and productive of many more. My case has been extraordinary; I have hardly met a single one resembling it."

Look at the quote from John Newton above. Experiences of

others, whether from church history or biblical examples, can make biblical principles more clear for us. But, we should never use our own experiences or those of others as a club to force people into one mold. John Newton said in 1764 that his deliverance from a state of hardened willful sin was a magnification of God's mercy toward sinners, but was no guarantee of deliverance to another. Overriding his own experience was the sovereignty of God to show mercy to whom He wished. (Newton, *Out of the Depths*, (Kregel Publications, p. 90.) A good example of this is to look at the relative smooth road American Christians have experienced since World War II contrasted to the British Puritans of the late 1600's who were persecuted for their faith, had high infant mortality rates, suffered plagues etc. It would be a gross misapplication of biblical principles to claim that since Americans have been prosperous and their children healthy, they obviously were more favored by God than the Puritans. To give another example, William Jay preached in the same church for more than sixty years and his life story illustrates the fruitfulness of a long ministry in one place reaping what you sow. But, it would be a mistake to make that a "rule" for all pastors, saying to leave one church for another is wrong. The pastor who moves is still going to reap what he sows, but Jay's long ministry should not become a club to whip him into guilt or make him stay where he is!

I see this happening frequently in the area of child rearing and discipline. One person finds a method that works for them. That then becomes a "rule" for other parents. "We must all adopt this approach for successful kids!" is the cry. Don't bet on it--even with methods Christians currently approve. That is making a life experience a rule for others.

What does this have to do with you? Your goal is to train your teen to think correctly and to profit from the examples of others. Ask the right questions, coach. What is the general foundational principle you see in this life story (or incident)? What biblical theme does John Newton's salvation illustrate? What lessons can you learn from Mary Lee's life? Not every wife has to knit socks for the army like Mary Lee. But, keeping on believing in God's faithfulness, trusting in His promises to never leave them and remaining faithful in performing duties are principles Mary Lee's life makes crystal clear. And those principles would apply to every woman whether black or white, Hispanic or European.

So do what you can. Expose them. Model before them. Keep asking the right questions until their thinking is habitual. And don't try to put an old head on a young body! They might not respond positively now, but, who knows, maybe as adults they will fly to biographies in their pursuit of holy and wise living.

**READ BIOGRAPHIES FOR MODELS OF HOW TO BUILD YOUR
SPIRITUAL HOUSE**