

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

Family Trees and Olive Branches is a must-read for individuals striving to grow a godly legacy in their immediate and extended families. Christina Hergenrader delicately addresses the deep need for families to love radically and extend grace upon grace. She uses heartfelt stories to illustrate both the brokenness of families when grace is scarce and the hope that is possible when grace abounds. *Family Trees and Olive Branches* beautifully lays out what a family culture filled with grace looks like while always relating it back to God's unique design to glorify Him through the family. If you desire to create new life, mend broken relationships, train your children, honor your parents, and bring glory to God through your family, *Family Trees and Olive Branches* is an instrumental book.

Melissa Brignac, Bible study leader

Christina Hergenrader explores families and family relationships in a unique and fascinating way. Her use of real-life examples to back up ideas for how we relate to our families and how we can improve those relationships makes this book a down-to-earth, easy-to-read guide. Short, well-organized chapters help the reader absorb the lessons taught. The author's use of Scripture and thought-provoking questions throughout the book shows the importance of approaching family relationships in a God-led, God-pleasing way. I highly recommend this book!

Helen Genter, educator

Family Trees and Olive Branches is a beautiful, in-depth study of how God works through every family to bring us closer to the center of His will. Families are a gift we sometimes wish we could return, but this book shows us how a culture of grace can bring families into a place of peace, love, and reconciliation.

Rebekah House, counselor for families and children

Family Trees and Olive Branches gives us a biblical lens to see our family. Christina helps us dive into our family tree with the power and the comfort of Jesus Christ and reminds us the Holy Spirit is working in each and every branch and root. Mostly, this book reminds us of God's loving grace and the redemption He has for us and for our families. Because not only is God the author and perfecter of our faith, but He is also the creator of our families.

Melissa Tonn, director of Christian education

It was refreshing to be reminded that God loves us in spite of the issues we might be dealing with in our families. A well-written and easy-to-digest book about GRACE and filled with biblical truths. This could be used for individual or group Bible study. Well thought-out questions throughout that will make you think and also dive into Scripture. *Family Trees and Olive Branches* will give you comfort and encouragement in the midst of your own family struggles.

Alice Rosenhagen, Bible study leader

How do we act when difficult, overbearing, or annoying people wreak havoc on the calm of our life? When these people happen to be members of our own family, responding with grace and kindness can be particularly daunting. In *Family Trees and Olive Branches*, Christina tackles the very complex subject of relational, family drama with respect, wit, and self-deprecation. Using real-life stories, she helps the reader to discern when forgiveness, confrontation, or boundary building is the most Christlike response. Her book is a wonderfully insightful guide to inserting grace into a wide variety of delicate, and sometimes toxic, situations.

Janet Mueller, Christian therapist

Christina Hergenrader boldly shares relevant stories connected to biblical truth, for families to keep building their firm foundation on Jesus' love so grace remains at the heart of the family. As a sister, daughter, mother, teacher, and administrator for over forty years, I think her writing is also a valuable guide for any leader to be successful with the "family" of colleagues they lead. How these colleagues are ministered to with the grace guidance in *Family Trees and Olive Branches* will certainly create a ripple effect of setting waves of grace in motion. This book will be a go-to guide for many years to come in my personal and professional life.

Debbie Baacke, educator

Christina Hergenrader makes two serious commitments in the opening pages of *Family Trees and Olive Branches*. These commitments are so personal for readers, I wondered if she could deliver on them. Initially, she commits to helping readers explore what it means to live in gracious, connected families. As if that is not enough of a challenge, she also promises to provide steps families can take toward experiencing such grace and connectedness. I'm pleased to share that the author met, and even exceeded, these commitments. Skillfully working with the metaphor of trees, she explores the wide range of experiences in families. Once exploration ends, Hergenrader shares very practical thoughts on how to create an environment for a gracious, connected family. I highly recommend *Family Trees and Olive Branches* for anyone who wants a clearer understanding of their family experience or desires their family to more deeply reflect God's design for families.

Kevin Wilson, pastor

The wisdom in *Family Trees and Olive Branches* hits so many places as a family grows. Christina Hergenrader has shared, with warmth and discernment, a vision of healthy family through God's eyes of love. Enjoy!

Barb Tanz, educator



CHRISTINA HERGENRADER

Family TREES & OLIVE BRANCHES

Creating a Culture of Grace in Your Family

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS

This book is for my mother-in-law, Marcilee Hergenrader.

I am honored to raise the next branch in the Hergenrader family tree. You have given so much to your family. Thank you for teaching me how to do the same.

This book is also for Fred Tonn.

Thank you for showing our family—and so many others—what it looks like to live and breathe for Jesus. Your example has changed our family's world. And now, we can change the world for Jesus.



Published 2017 by Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63118-3968
1-800-325-3040 · www.cph.org

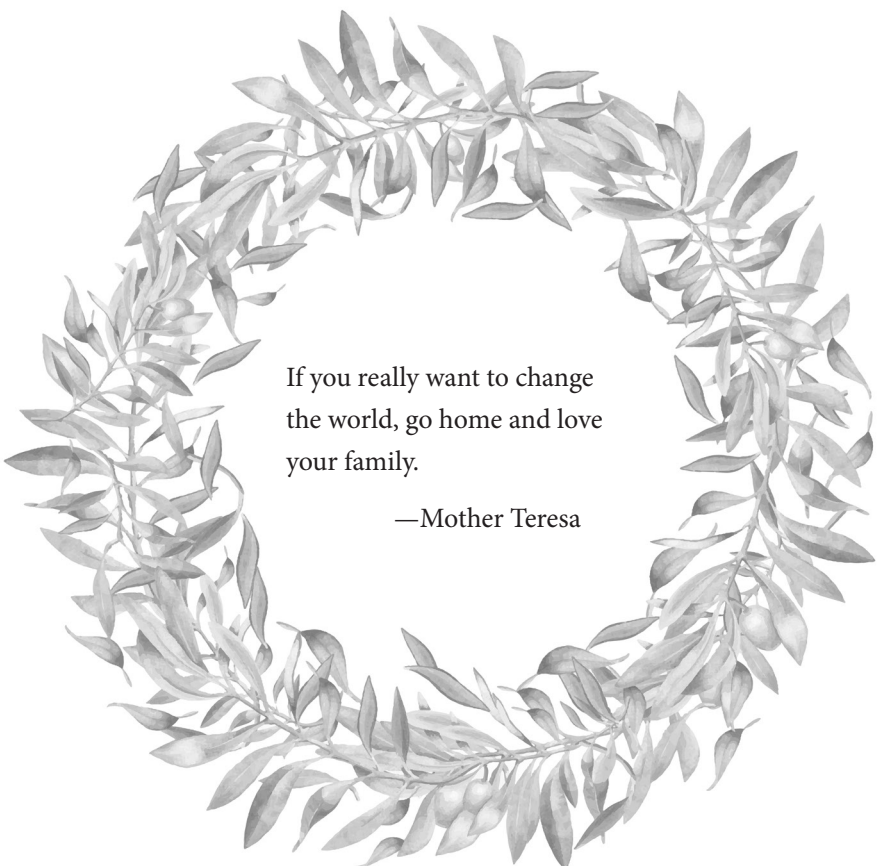
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Manufactured in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17



If you really want to change
the world, go home and love
your family.

—Mother Teresa



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
SECTION 1: A Culture of . . . What?	9
SECTION 2: God Loves Families	29
SECTION 3: The Price of Pride	55
SECTION 4: Hurricanes of Conflict	81
SECTION 5: Prodigal Siblings	107
SECTION 6: Better Boundaries Make Better Families	131
SECTION 7: 49 Olive Branches for Busy Families	155
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	198

Introduction

A culture of grace in your family . . .

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth. *Ephesians 3:14–18*

Hi there, daughters, dads, moms, uncles, stepsisters, and grandparents . . .

Summer vacation starts tomorrow for our four kids. They're so excited to be free of spelling tests that they can hardly breathe. I'm looking forward to all of us being home together too. We've learned a lot about grace over this past year, and I'm hopeful this summer will be different from previous summers. We've become better at forgiving, at connection, and at communicating. Our family culture has changed from one of frantic busyness to one of grace.

Even if you don't have kids at home, you are a part of a family. And through the generations, you've created a culture within that family. Your culture might be one of grace and connection. Or it might be a culture of regret. Or of grudges. Or of apathy.

In the following pages, you'll look closely at your family's culture and how you can improve it.

My prayer is that this book is an anthem of hope for your family. And, like Paul writes in Ephesians, I pray that the Spirit will strengthen you so that Christ may dwell in your heart and that you'll be rooted in love.

May God bless your family for generations to come . . .

Christina

P.S. I would love to see how God is changing your family's culture. Tag pictures that show a #cultureofgrace on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

Let's share the salt and light of Jesus with a world that needs Him. Love starts with your own family—and that love always starts with God's grace.

This Book Is Not . . .

Based on Research or Statistics. Sociologists and scientists have studied what works in families for a long time, but this isn't a book about research.

Instead, this is a glimpse into the living rooms of grace-filled families, to understand how these families love one another well. In these chapters, you'll find real stories, God's Word, and questions to help guide you to better share God's love with your family.

A Substitute for Christian Counseling. If you've been the victim of abuse in your family, I am so, so sorry. Families are full of the ugliest sin. Stories of terrible abuse are way too common. Please meet with a trained Christian counselor and with a pastor to help you heal. And then come back and read this book.

Exactly the Way It Happened. Although the stories in this book come from interviews with real men and women, I have changed their names and certain details about their stories. You'll recognize the relationships and takeaways as true, even if some of the unimportant details have been changed.

That's all. Let's get started!





A CULTURE OF . . . WHAT?

My whole life, my mother has been my biggest problem.

I don't know how this is possible, but she's both needy and remote.

She lives across the country from me, but I can always feel her opinion. "That shirt is too tight." "Eating out wastes money." "Crying won't help anything."

To feel really bad about myself, I only have to think about some of what my mom has said to me over the years. Once, she told me that the reason she gets along with my teenage son so well is because they have a "mutual enemy." She meant me!

I have always driven her crazy. She thinks I'm too nervous, that I'm a pushover with my husband, and that I'm too heavy.

If I am any of those things, it's because of her.

—Sarah, 52

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

John 15:4–5



The Comforting, Constricting Cocoon of Family



As I interviewed dozens of men and women about family, I rediscovered the truth we all know: your family is your single biggest influence. The parents who raised you and the siblings you called your first friends formed you in both huge and imperceptible ways. They provided your most important nurturing, taught you how to see the world, and set in motion the journey that has led you to where you are sitting right now.

Your first family (your family of origin) is a rich thread spun around you, like invisible gauze that holds together everything about your earthly identity. You always carry this silken armor of family with you. This cocoon traps your deepest secrets, your most hurtful tragedies, and your happiest memories. You could never measure the ways the shell of family both comforts you and constricts you.

As I interviewed friends for this book and heard their stories of family, I could see this gauzy layer over each person's perception. These men and women could trace their current joys, their deepest values, their stubborn prejudices, their humor, and their quirky taste back to what their families had taught them.

Let's call that phenomenon—this special layer on all of us—the *family filter*, and let's look at the power it holds over us.

As you look more closely at your family's filter, you might be surprised at some of your emotions. The viewpoint your family gave you might have been extremely helpful in navigating life—but it also may have crippled you in some ways. Before we go further, write a couple sentences describing how you feel about your family filter. Was it overall healthy? What were some major problems?

PASSING DOWN A BETTER FAMILY PORTRAIT

The biggest reason for any of us to learn lessons for a better culture is so we can pass down a better family portrait to the next generation. Less fighting, more connectedness, more grace.

On the timeline of raising our kids, Mike and I are at the halfway point of us all living together. Catie is twelve and almost a teenager. Sam and Elisabeth, our twins, are nine. And Nate is six. Over the past year, we've learned so much about creating a culture of grace in our house. And yet, we're still learning valuable lessons every day.

Maybe you can recognize our family's struggles from your house too. First, efficiency rules in our household, and to save time, we expect our kids to stay in their prescribed roles (The Sweetheart, The Bossy One, The Scapegoat, The Troublemaker). When we're tired, our boundaries become weak, and we are inconsistent in what we expect of one another. Our default reaction is pride, and we hold onto grudges too long.

Even though our family has a long way to go in developing a culture of grace, we've learned so much. Most of all, we've learned the importance of the family filter we give our kids. Also, we've come to understand our heavenly Father as our ultimate caretaker, the one who nurtures us with love that we can—and should—share with one another. Understanding this has made such a difference in our family.

Here's what I still want to teach my kids before they leave and then start families of their own: you can enjoy one another; your siblings can become your most important allies. Laughing and silliness and curiosity are free and infinite gifts—life together can include lots of all these. Take care of one another with gracious and tenacious generosity. Forgive freely, several times a day. Let your yes be yes and your no be no—but also be flexible enough to care for one another.

This is not only what I want to teach my kids—it's what God wants. Our

Father gives us models of families and the promise of grace in His Means of Grace—the Bible and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He also gives us our families as important laboratories of first relationships. It's here that we practice how to share His love with one another.

Next to each of these life areas, write a word or two about your family's filter. Try not to think too much about your answer and don't edit your responses. Write the word that describes your family's attitude toward each of these parts of life.

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. God: _____ | 14. Travel: _____ |
| 2. Love: _____ | 15. Authority: _____ |
| 3. Food: _____ | 16. Nature: _____ |
| 4. Rest: _____ | 17. Sex: _____ |
| 5. Conflict: _____ | 18. School: _____ |
| 6. Marriage: _____ | 19. Alcohol: _____ |
| 7. Work: _____ | 20. Politics: _____ |
| 8. Laughter: _____ | 21. Holidays: _____ |
| 9. Friends: _____ | 22. Violence: _____ |
| 10. Exercise: _____ | 23. Anger: _____ |
| 11. Grandparents: _____ | 24. Volunteering: _____ |
| 12. Church: _____ | 25. Forgiveness: _____ |
| 13. Siblings: _____ | |

Not only that, God gives us the specific gift of our families. These people belong to us in deep and obvious ways. We can see God's love for family throughout the Bible. He blessed Abraham and Sarah with generations of descendants. He created whole nations of His people through messy births and adoptions. He selected certain men and women to be part of the lineage of Jesus. God has given (and still gives) unique tasks to specific families. He still grants specific blessings through families.

Most important: God sent Jesus, the biggest news in the history of the world, through a *family*. Our Creator doesn't clone us or form each of us from dust or send us to earth as orphans—He uses families to nurture us and teach us. Look to history, or to the mirror, or to your own past, or to the Bible, and you will find the same answer: family is God's specific design for and gift to us.

To understand what your family has taught you to believe about the world and about God and about one another, let's see if we can peek behind the filter.

DIGGING IN YOUR FAMILY'S ROOTS

To understand both the filter of your childhood family—and of the family you're raising now—let's look at the generations before you. Maybe the roots of your family tree are in some rocky soil. Maybe the heritage your parents gave you has been tainted by the generations before them.

Talking with families has made me realize that these old roots have the power to pollute even the newest branches on your family tree. I talked to one family that had been fighting a decade-long war that had driven a wedge between the cousins. In another family, the divisions and hurt feelings between two of the aunts were like a slow-growing sickness. Many members of the families I interviewed didn't know one another anymore. Too many miles and years and hurt feelings had pulled them apart. The newest generation had been orphaned by its oldest members.

Or, possibly, it's none of these, you just don't have the time to work on a better relationship with your siblings or extended family. Sure, it sounds like a good idea. But who has the energy for it?

As you dig a bit in the roots of your family tree, you can probably unearth all of this. And maybe it doesn't even feel like a better family culture matters very much. You have a wonderful spouse, loyal friends, a strong community, and a good job.

But there are three problems with that plan: (1) You are modeling a culture to the next generation. Your kids and grandkids and nieces and nephews are watching how you treat your siblings—and they are learning how to treat theirs. They're noticing how you care for your parents and determining how they will one day care for you. They're learning how to love family by how you handle your most difficult relationships. (2) God has assigned you to your family, both the one you come from and the one you're raising. These are your people. Yes, they are full of problems and sin, and we'll discuss how you can show grace to one another in the midst of that. But because God is an intentional Creator, you can trust that these are most certainly your people. (3) The way you treat your family has a lot to do with how you see God. Do you believe He's your loving Father who takes perfect care of you and shows you constant grace?

Then this is how you can show that love to the people in your family.

Write the major events of your family history here. In broad strokes, describe the family portrait you were handed. Start by thinking of a few words to describe your mom's parents. Then, write a few words to describe your dad's family. Now, think about what your parents taught you by their words and their actions. What did family mean to your grandparents?

FAMILIES IN HOSPITAL HALLWAYS

God appointed you to the family you have right now. That's a pretty serious assignment. Through birth or through adoption or through a blended family, the people you call family are God's intentional creation. This is the clan you care for and who cares for you.

Perhaps this is most obvious by the moments you share with them in hospital hallways. These corners and corridors are the stages for family drama and intimacy.

Hospital rooms are where far-flung children come together to make decisions about their mom's last breaths. This is where the estranged uncle shows up to get the bad news about grandpa's heart. This is the place of births and sickness and healing and prayer and money struggles and hugs and tears and fights. Hospital hallways might also be where you realize that you, too, are tied to your family *forever*.

When one friend had a baby, I sat in the orange plastic chairs in the waiting room with her family. Our little impromptu party included her sister and brother and parents. I knew all of them from the stories my friend had told me, especially about the epic fights she had had with her sister. At Christmas, her sister had called her the worst names, and they hadn't spoken in months.

And then, that same sister hugged my friend on the hospital bed—first tentatively and then harder, and then for a very long time. Her brother awkwardly held the newest generation in their family, and he whispered to his new niece. Seeing the connection of these feuding family members gave me goosebumps. This felt like I was witnessing something sacred.

Next, my friend passed the new baby to her sister. And this new auntie cradled her niece and cooed and cried. Her brother had tears in his eyes too. My friend cried, too, so touched that her brother and sister were there to meet their niece. No discussion about the Christmas fight. No more silent treatment. They were all enchanted to gather around the next generation of their family.

This is the power of family connection. Even deeper than the fights, there's a deep bond that flows between people who share a name, a bloodline, a history.

In that hospital room, my friend shared these deeper things with her siblings. This bond wasn't anything she could have described in a Facebook post about her new baby. This was more profound. This was their ancient connection.

Let's talk about your experience in hospitals—from celebrating new life to gathering around the beds of those taking their last breaths. Think back to those moments and make a list of the parts of these scenes that have been the same. Who is there with you, scrolling through cell phones in the waiting room? Who is talking to the doctor or running out for tacos? Who is crying from relief or joy or sadness or guilt? Write what this tells you about the power of family.

HOLIDAYS: WHEN THE FAMILY FILTERS GLOW BRIGHTEST OF ALL

Today, I had lunch with my friend Kate, and I was surprised to hear her terrible disappointment about her sister and her kids not coming to Easter dinner at their parents' house. Through tears, she listed the reasons that her indifference stung: her family made it a point to gather for holidays; Easter was her son's birthday, her family ALWAYS celebrated birthdays together; her boys hadn't seen their cousins for months. Kate really didn't like that.

Kate and I have known each other for years, but we're not so close that I quite understood why she was this upset.

Then, in the corner of the coffee shop, Kate explained that this particular struggle probed at an old bruise, one that went deep into their family's history. Kate's mom insisted she come to every holiday because that's what her role as the oldest daughter has always been. Kate was not only supposed to show up, she was expected to help plan the whole day—everything from the Easter egg hunt to the chocolate bunny cake for dessert. Her younger sister always got a pass on stuff like this because her parents “have always treated her like the baby.”

Holidays, like hospitals, are another place where your family's filter colors your expectations, your hopes, your hurts, and your history. You probably have learned, from an early age, what celebrations mean. They're a time to eat the forbidden foods or to sit in the pew at Christmas Eve services or to get along with people whom you have fought with all year. You have learned your family traditions like you've learned about the Easter bunny and Santa's reindeer and the words to “Silent Night.”

You are most likely passing down those same attitudes to the next generation too. Are you teaching them the most important parts? Are you using the time your family gathers to celebrate and also to connect? To love one another well?

Write three memories you have of Christmas or Easter or birthdays. Who gathered together? Who did the work for the gathering? What were the unspoken rules at your family holidays? What did you love most about how your family celebrated holidays? What did you dislike? Is this still how your family celebrates holidays today? Is this how you're celebrating holidays with your own kids? Why or why not?

GOD IS MY _____

Right along with holidays and hospitals, there is a third way that your family filter colors the way you see the world: what do you believe about God?

As I discovered from talking to people, this is the most complicated and powerful lesson their families have taught them.

Your family's lessons about God were probably complex because your parents may have preached one lesson about Him but lived a different one. Your family might have taught that Jesus loves you, but they didn't go to church. Or they might have told you that it was important to be a good person, but they never talked about what good was or the real reasons you should follow the rules. Maybe you cobbled together a fragmented faith with no support. You might have left home to start a family of your own without being totally sure what you (or your parents) believed about God.

Your family filter of faith becomes more confusing when you marry into another filter. If the filter your parents gave you is red, and your spouse's filter is blue, the filter you give your kids is purple. When it comes to teaching your kids about God, you probably find that you're bumping into your spouse's filter on everything from how often you go to church to what the service should look like when you're there.

Again, the remarkable part of this for your family is that the roots of your tree always influence the buds that are developing now. If you grew up ambiguous and confused about who God is, your kids will be also. If you grew up seeing God as a slightly angry egomaniac, you'll pass that view down to your kids.

But if you're clear that God is your heavenly Father, who sent His Son to die for your sins, and whose Spirit sustains your faith . . . your kids will learn that too.

If you're married, write about the purple filter of faith you're passing down to your children. What beliefs about God and faith do you and your spouse share? Where do you not agree completely?

GOD'S FAMILY TREES

Thankfully, God doesn't leave us stranded when it comes to understanding who He is. Throughout the Bible, we learn the sprawling story of our heavenly Father, who loves us so much that He sent His Son to redeem us. God also

gives us plenty of pictures of families—lots of ones that messed up, many that showed radical forgiveness, some that failed at reconnecting, and some that supported one another in the most beautiful ways.

So, let's learn what God teaches us about getting along with one another, especially with those we are related to, which are often our most difficult relationships. Sharing God's lessons about how to love one another is the best investment you can make in the next generation. One day, they will find themselves in those hospital room moments or trying to plan Christmas with their siblings. Wouldn't it be a wonderful gift if the people surrounding them are the ones they can laugh with, pray with, and trust? The ones who also understand repentance and forgiveness? The ones who know God as their Father, the one providing the love that connects them?

List your hopes for the future of your family. What do you hope you're teaching the next generation? Picture a family gathering ten years from now, twenty years from now, fifty years from now. Write about that scene: who do you want gathered there, and what's your greatest hope for each of those people?

WHICH CULTURE ARE YOU GROWING?

The truth about families (and about trees, and about family trees particularly) is that the environment where they grow matters. A tree without water withers. One that doesn't get the right nutrients from the soil grows malformed. And a tree that doesn't receive sunshine doesn't sprout new buds. Toxic environments produce sickly trees.

This also happens in families. Perhaps you grew up in a noxious home environment, one that tainted your view of family and of God. Just like a tree, you didn't know this environment was malnourished because it was all you had ever known. It wasn't until later—perhaps not until you began to raise your own kids—that you realized how your family of origin didn't provide an environment for love to thrive.

Your parents might have subtly punished you when you tried for independence. Or your mom and dad taught you that success was so important they equated it with love. Perhaps you've realized that self-righteousness was so thick in the air of your home, you were all choking on it. Or maybe as you've had more experience with relationships, you've understood that what your parents taught you about boundaries wasn't very helpful or safe.

Maybe your parents, in their very best efforts to protect you, convinced you that the world was very scary and should be avoided. This is a culture of fear.

If your parents were especially sensitive to what everyone else thought of your family, it is a culture of image.

If your parents demanded you follow the rules precisely and punished you when you didn't, then a culture of control ruled.

And, finally, if your house was run by an overworked, alcoholic, or mentally unstable parent, you might have grown up in a culture of chaos.

The trouble with all of these cultures—and the specific problem of passing them to the next generation—is that they don't help raise kids who understand their identity as God's children.

These cultures teach kids that love has to be earned, or that love is scarce, or that love is tightly calibrated to performance. If the next generation believes these lies about love, how can they also believe they are loved perfectly by their heavenly Father? How can they share His love with the world?

In a culture of grace, kids see that they are valuable to their family. This truth is crucial for the way they receive love and share love. Because in a culture of grace, kids don't feel like they are accepted only if they follow specific rules for success. They don't feel like they're loved only if they pretend to agree with you. They understand that you love them in spite of what they do—not because of what they do.

Kids raised in a culture of grace understand that others have expectations for their behavior, that they won't always meet those expectations, but they will always be loved because you *belong* to one another.

A culture of grace in your extended family can change the way the branches of your whole family tree connect.

This can take time, for sure. But it is so important because God's love is the message of the Gospel—it is the love that sent Jesus to the cross for us and the love we get to share in our most important relationships.

Think about your extended family. What culture has developed between the branches of your family tree? How did this develop? What do you think it would take to change that culture, all the way down to the deepest roots of your family tree?

SOIL, SUNLIGHT, AND GRACE FOR YOUR FAMILY TREE

A culture of grace is a healthy environment. It's the nutritious soil of God's Word and the radiant sunlight of His love.

Here's what a culture of grace looks like: everyone is held accountable, but no one is expected to be perfect. Forgiveness is everywhere, and everyone is free to be honest. Your kids feel safe because they know they will be loved forever. Family members can be vulnerable and transparent—and accepted for who they are—because nothing will separate them from their family.

Maybe you grew up in a culture of grace, and you are doing your best to copy what your parents did right. Growing up in a family with strong sibling bonds, sweet traditions, radical forgiveness, good communication, and healthy boundaries is a gift. God has shown you the blueprint for the culture you're building now.

Write the name of a family you've known who has lived in a culture of grace. Next to the name (maybe it's your name!) also add a couple sentences about what you saw in their family tree that was grace-filled living. What is one habit you can use in your own family?

THE TWISTING BRANCHES OF YOUR FAMILY TREE

Even if you only know your family history from a few generations back, you probably will have trouble calling it completely healthy or completely sickly. Although you've inherited many of your habits and values from your family, the branches of your family tree are made up of individuals. Over the decades, some branches of your family tree have grown toward the sunlight, while others have withered in the darkness.

Parts of your family might sparkle with love and togetherness. *We have gathered at the same beach house for four generations. My great-grandfather baptized every one of us. No divorces in our whole family history. We all live near one another, and most of us get together at least once a month.*

But other parts of your family might be covered in confusing layers of lies and agendas and secrets. *No one talks to my mom's brother and his side of the family. We weren't allowed to ask about why my grandparents separated. I stopped speaking to my sister after our mom died because she took what was supposed to belong to both of us.*

Not one family I talked to for this book—or that you or I have known—lives in perfect harmony. Even those who understand unconditional love don't always love in the right ways. Even those families who try to show constant grace mess it up more often than they get it right. These families, who try so hard to get forgiveness right, fail at it every day.

Or, sometimes, these grace-filled families endure a sudden tragedy—a lightning strike of pain and chaos—and they have to relearn everything about how to love one another. A car accident. Stillbirth. Jail time. Unplanned pregnancy. Everyone is scared—and scary. Suddenly, the tree is in danger of disease breaking off whole branches. And sometimes in the aftermath, good intentions and Bible-based habits get lost. Even the strongest families have to go back to the beginning, to God's love, and show one another grace.

No family is completely anemic of grace either. Even those that have endured painful breaks, rotted roots, and unhealthy environments can bear new life. This is the miracle of trees. And it's certainly the miracle of family trees.

God never gives up—this is what's so amazing about grace. So even the family tree that looks as dead as a pile of firewood can be teeming with new white blossoms of grace that are just about to burst on the limbs.

Has your family endured the lightning bolt of tragedy? Maybe the sudden death of a beloved member? Perhaps an ugly divorce? A black sheep that shunned the family? How have you seen shoots of grace, of new life, bloom on your family tree?

THE BRANCH OF NEW LIFE

The symbol of an olive branch has meant peace for as far back as ancient Roman and Greek civilizations. Typically, we think of extending the olive branch as a way of ending a war.

The United Nations flag contains an olive branch for this very reason, to proclaim the hope of world peace. The olive branch is also on the Great Seal of the United States to signify this same hope, an end to all of our country's wars. And when Neil Armstrong traveled to the moon, he left a golden olive branch as a symbol of peace to other countries.

Except the olive branch doesn't just mean peace. For Christians, it carries a much more important message. And it's in this message—*specifically in this promise from God*—where we can find hope for our family trees.

Let's look back to Noah and his family in Genesis 7 and 8.

After forty days and nights of rain, stranded on their ark with all of the animals, Noah and his family were desperate. To say that they were scared would be simplifying all that these men and women had survived. (To name a few: building the ark and the ridicule that went with that, gathering the animals, living with one another and all those animals through forty days of rain, and worrying about what would come next.)

Their family must have felt both relieved that they had been right about the flood and terrified about what all this rain meant. Because who wants to be right that God has destroyed the earth and all its inhabitants except them?

And what now? *More* rain? What would life be like now, starting from absolutely nothing? Where to even start? For miles and miles, they could see only water. Was this the new earth? How could they grow anything here? What would they eat?

Noah needed a plan. First, he first sent out a raven to find food (see Genesis 8:6–7), but nothing came from that. Then, Noah “sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him” (Genesis 8:8–9).

After another seven days, “again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth” (Genesis 8:10–11).

The olive branch was the symbol of new life. Just as God had promised. So much destruction—and now a little green bud, a new start.

As in Baptism, the water had washed away the sin to reveal the new creation God had begun on the Earth. This was a miracle, for sure. And for the family huddled on that boat, the news of the olive branch was the very best. Yes, God had done exactly what He said He would. Yes, the worst was over. Yes, God was giving new life. Yes, it was time to rebuild. All of this from an olive branch.

If you’ve ever seen an olive branch, then you know it’s not very strong. It’s light enough for God’s most fragile creature—a dove—to carry it in its beak. But this little green shoot meant everything. We know now that this branch meant the world would one day be lush and fruitful enough to support billions of people.

Most important, the olive branch pointed to God’s promise, just like the rainbow did (see Genesis 9:14–15). The Creator would resurrect what had been lost. Never again would He flood the earth—in fact, He would save His people through the birth of His Son.

These are the recurring themes in the Bible: Sin destroys, God creates. Sin wears down, God renews. Sin kills, God resurrects. Sin abandons and God nurtures.

Perhaps, through your own family tree, you’ve seen God’s promise play out. Sin tears your family apart, and God gives you olive branches of new life and love.

Sketch an olive branch here. On the small leaves of the branch, write the ways that God has taken care of you. Think of how He provides exactly what you need for your body, your mind, your emotions, and your spirit.

THE MIRACLE OF NEW LIFE

To review, your family is the group that shares your most significant parts. They may have the same face and body type and history and routines and ethnicity and secrets. They may have the same background and filters and preferences and even the same ideas about politics and church and holidays and processed foods.

Or maybe your story of coming together is one of adoption or of a step-family. You can see how your heavenly Father wove together the right people and places and events for you to belong in this very family. This is your mom, your dad, your brothers, your sisters, and your grandparents. Your people.

For the rest of your life, you'll see these same faces around birthday cakes and Mother's Day brunches and July Fourth sparklers and as you sing "Joy to the World" together. You are also connected in the deepest ways in what you know about who God is—and what that means for how you live your life.

As you've grown, you've realized that there are parts of your family's culture that you don't want to repeat. Maybe it's your mom's self-righteousness or your dad's anger that you don't want to see in your own kids. Maybe you've even realized that those habits might have a lot to do with the struggles you have with your own family today.

At some point, you've probably realized it's up to you to change this culture for your own kids. That change begins when you stop blaming the rocky soil around your family tree and realize there is hope for your family. Real hope from God, who loves second chances.

This is when you also realize that God can give you the tools to change the culture of your family. He can transform how you forgive and how you live

together. These lessons can change the way you see other people too.

It's by design that God gives us our families to love first—and through those lessons, we learn how to love the rest of the world. Learn well, dear friend. These are important instructions.

A culture of grace can teach your kids the most important lessons about who God is and what it means to be loved by Him. Understanding that His love is free and infinite can help your family see that they never need to feel insecure. You can give your family the gift of knowing their value to God—and their value to one another. This is a culture of grace.

To be sure, you will find some struggles along the way. To reverse decades of unhealthy beliefs and hurtful behavior takes boldness and compassion and the Lord. Only He can change hearts. Pray for Him to help you transform the culture of your family.

Through this process, you might also find yourself at odds with those who gave you your identity. This can be tricky water to navigate. How do you make changes when these new habits feel like a betrayal to the clan that raised you? Again, ask the Lord to guide your thoughts, words, and actions. Ask Him to help you be compassionate to your parents as you show the next generation how to love one another in a culture of grace. A better family is waiting.

Most of all, remember that this is the same God who brought out the gorgeous new branch of life after the destruction of the whole Earth.

He can and does create new life, right in your own family.

Write a letter to the roots of your family tree about what you would love to see change in your family. Start this note, "Dear Family . . ." Thank them for what you are grateful they have taught you and describe what hope you have for the next generation.

Sean: An Olive Branch Story of Hope

Our friend Sean makes me laugh every time I see him. Not only is he witty and silly, but he also has the rare gift of true charisma. Sean works as a pharmaceutical salesman and was just named the top producer in the country. This is because he's a hard worker and because his love for life is contagious. Everyone loves to be around our dear friend Sean.

Sean's boys, Henry and Sammy, are our two boys' best friends, so we get a close-up view into their house. It's high-energy for sure (Sean often wakes up the family with plans to visit a water park or to go fishing that day). His wife, Connie, never knows what they're up for on a given Saturday morning.

But we also get to see Sean's priorities. Every day, he aims to share his faith with his sons and to raise them to stay connected to their family. As Sean says, "I want my boys to stay so close that they talk to each other every day. I want them to be a big part of each other's lives forever. I want them to be confident that they're loved by their family."

This isn't the kind of family Sean came from, though. His parents were divorced, and he grew up as a latchkey kid in a home with lots of dysfunction and fights. His mom was bipolar and a raging alcoholic.

When Sean was eight years old, he watched his house burn down from a cigarette that had been left burning. He was moved around several times after that. A few months later, on Easter morning, as he was climbing in the car with his mom, his grandma pulled him out of the car. His mom, who had been drinking, left without him. That day, his mom hit another vehicle and was killed. Sean says, "It was a miracle I wasn't in that car. God had something more for me."

Sean wouldn't discover what else God had for him for several more years. During his years as a rebellious teen, tough years with an unloving stepmom, and dips into drugs and alcohol, Sean struggled to know what God wanted him to do with his life. "My high school years were hard," he says. "There was no one breathing life into me. I felt destined to live on the Island of Misfit Toys. I would definitely change those years if I could. All around me, I saw normal parents who were involved and loving and knew their kids. It was really, really humbling."

It was when Sean married Connie, and when they had Henry and Sammy,

that he discovered this is what God had been preparing him for. God wanted Sean to be the transformative generation in his family.

And, now, he is just that. Sean is raising his boys in a radically different culture than the one in which he was raised. Sean is constantly breathing the life of the Holy Spirit into his sons, building them up in the Lord, teaching them about real love by living it with them.

Sean says, “My goal for my boys is that they would have hearts anchored in Jesus and filled with the Spirit. I don’t want them always searching for the next thing. I want them to know whose they are. They belong to God.”

