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"THE CHALLENGES OF ADOLESCENCE"

Scripture: I Samuel 17

by John R. Claypool

James Dobson has described that segment of the human pilgrimage called adolescence as "a time of indigestion, heartburn and trauma." He says it is hard to tell for whom it is the most difficult--the adolescent who is undergoing all kinds of physical and emotional and social upheavals, or the other members of the family who suddenly realize that their little baby is not a child any longer and must now face some of the challenges of life unaccompanied by them. Dobson concludes that adolescence is that time of life "that offers something painful for everybody."

I think this assessment of things is essentially correct. While every stage of life has its own particular challenges and turbulence, the traumas of adolescence may well be the most intense of all, which makes it all the more imperative that no one just "happen up" on this period unprepared. As I said last week and will repeat again and again, what we do not know most assuredly can hurt us, and this is nowhere truer than in that difficult transitional period called adolescence.

Several years ago, while I was a pastor in Kentucky, I
~~Last Tuesday morning out in the seminary chapel I told of a packet I received years ago while~~
received through the mail a packet containing
~~I was pastor in Kentucky. It contained~~ a little book entitled Understanding Womanhood and one of the most poignant letters I have ever read. It seems that a couple in the northern part of that state

had had only one child -- a lovely little girl who was the apple of their eye. They had attempted to give her every advantage that they knew how to provide, yet unexpectedly, just as she turned thirteen, she put a gun to her mouth and committed suicide. After her death, they found the diary that she had been keeping, and for the first time realized that she had been experiencing great inner turmoil about the changes that were occurring in her body and her feelings and all around her. You see, no one had forwarned her about all these things that start happening to a person around eleven or twelve or thirteen, and the fearfulness of it all was too much for her to handle. The letter went on to say that this couple had decided to take the money that they had saved up for this child's college education and send a copy of this book to every clergyman in Kentucky. They said touchingly, "If we had only known and had been able to communicate to our little daughter some of the truths that are in this book, perhaps she would be with us yet." *As that thought* When I put down the letter, I realized how relevant the *Jesus' prayer* ~~prayer of Jesus~~ from the cross ~~often is~~ "Father, forgive them, for they know now what they do." Think of the pain that has occurred across the years, not ~~just~~ from human badness, but from human blindness! What those parents and consequently that little girl did not know about adolescence did hurt them! And while I do not promise this morning to shed so much light that this

segment of the journey will be made easy and painless, it cannot help but help to know as much as we can about that "valley of the shadows" between childhood and adulthood called adolescence.

The first thing we need to get straight is the meaning of the term itself. The word "adolescence" does not refer to the awakening of sexual awareness in the individual. The technical term for that is "puberty." Adolescence stands for that transitional period between the dependency of childhood and the independency, or more accurately, the interdependency of adulthood. Its length has varied from culture to culture. In many primitive tribes there was no adolescent period at all.

One day a boy would be playing and under the complete control of his parents. That night he would be sent on ^a ~~the~~ mythical hunt ~~that Dr. Cooley referred to last Sunday night~~, and if he survived, he was regarded thereafter as an adult member of the clan. In our western industrialized civilizations, however, we have developed the longest period of adolescence in history. It can last for upwards to fifteen years sometimes. I know several twenty-six year old graduate students who are still being supported by their parents, and while they are physically and emotionally adult, in terms of dependency they are still adolescents. This is obviously, then, an "in-between" time, that segment of life when an individual is denied the privileges of childhood, and yet does not possess the freedom

and power of adulthood either. It is not surprising, therefore, that all kinds of pressures and conflicts surface at this particular juncture of life. In the most literal sense, what you encounter here are "growing pains." Both the adolescent and the family members are faced with learning to do something new; that is, how to let ^a ~~their~~ relationship which has existed basically in one form for a decade or so begin to stretch and enlarge without snapping or exploding. How can the intimacy that *has existed between parents and a child* ~~people have known as parent and child~~ be transformed into the kind of intimacy that is appropriate for adults with adults? This is the challenge that adolescence fling down before us, and it takes very different forms for the various parties involved.

For example, the growth-task facing the parent is the delicate feat of "letting up" on the relationship without "letting go" of it completely. The adolescent very much needs for the parent to step back and give space enough that he or she can begin to make decisions on their own. A teenager once complained: "My mother hovers over me like a helicopter. I'm fifteen years old, yet if I'm in the basement and sneeze and she is in the attic, she turns into a distance runner and is by my side the next moment saying breathlessly: 'Are you catching a cold?'" There was a time in that lad's infancy when such attentiveness was absolutely crucial. But now a measure of distance is just as

essential. However, not total distance. Remember, while the adolescent is no longer a dependent child, neither is he or she a fully autonomous adult either. To step back but not ~~to~~ ^{the} walk out on a relationship completely is the trick, and learning how to distance one's self appropriately from the adolescent is the ~~new~~ growth-challenge for the parent.

For the adolescent, the challenge can also be put in terms of distance, but it takes a different form. He or she must learn to pick up what the parents are laying down, learn to accept responsibility increasingly for their own ^{decisions,} ~~gifts and the ways of the world~~ and learn to walk into the larger field of relationships without walking away from ^{those} the sources that brought them into the world. The goal is not independence as much as interdependency -- coming to relate adult to adult not only with one's own peers but also with one's parents. Here then are the challenges: in the one case "to let up" without "letting go," to step back without walking out on a relationship; and the other to pick up responsibility and walk forward into the world without walking away from one's sources. Nobody ever said it would be easy, and to my knowledge no family has ever carried it off perfectly, not even King David¹⁵ remarkable human being that he was.

The whole seventeenth chapter of I Samuel describes a climactic moment in the drama of David's

adolescence. He was obviously ^{was} at an "in between" stage. He was no longer playing in the sandpile ~~out back~~ but rather out in the fields tending sheep. However, he was still under the control of others -- his father and subsequently Saul the King. Three of his brothers had enlisted with Saul to fight the Philistines, and one day David's father suggested that he take them some food and bring back word of their welfare. When David arrived at the battle station, he was dismayed to find the forces of Israel quaking in fear. A huge mountain of a man named Goliath came out from the other side every morning and evening and challenged any Hebrew to engage in one-to-one combat. There had been a day when Saul the King would have risen to such a challenge in a moment, but his courage and confidence had left him, and as a result, the whole Hebrew army was being unmanned with fear. David's reaction was a classic expression of adolescent idealism. He came into that situation unjaded and unfatigued by life. This is one of the great roles that youths play in the process of history. He had not "been everywhere and seen everything and done it all." He had an exuberant faith in the God of Israel and great confidence in his own abilities. Thus, to everyone's amazement he offered to accept Goliath's challenge and fight for the honor of the Lord of Hosts. Word of this boldness got back to Saul and he sent for the young man, and what follows is a classic interaction between an emerging adolescent and the older generation. Saul's first reaction was surprise; it

startled him that a lad who so shortly before had been playing underfoot would now be making "man-noises," and proposing to do something significant. We all tend to freeze our children sentimentally in the "baby category," so that almost invariably their emergence as significant individuals catches us by surprise. David countered the charge that he was merely a child by telling of how he had fought lions and bears out in the wilds as a shepherd, and it finally dawned on Saul that the one before him was not a baby at all but a young man "come of age." Saul's next reaction was also

typical. *Sensing that David really* *Saul* ~~Realizing David~~ meant business and was going out there to fight Goliath, ~~he~~ proceeded to

load him down with his own armor -- to take the shields and breastplates that had been designed for

him and put them on David. This must have been a comical spectacle indeed. Saul was reputedly a

very large man, standing head and shoulders above the average Hebrew, and just imagine how young

David must have looked in all that over-sized "get-up." Yet is not this precisely what we older

folk do when it finally hits us that our children are going to have to move out unaccompanied by us?

We hurriedly try to dress them up in our ideas, our advice about this and that, what we did on our

first date or in high school or so forth. What we do not realize is that they are unique individuals

living in a different time than our past, and somebody else's armor is really not what they need. In

a real sense every person must forge his or her own weapons, *and* *beliefs* and convictions. In speak-

ing of children in The Prophet, Kahil Gibran very wisely says to parents: "You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies, but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you, for life goes not backwards nor tarries with yesterday. You are the bow from which your children as living arrows are sent forth. The Archer sees the mark upon the path of the Infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far. Let your bending in the Archer's hand be for gladness, for even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable." This is so true, and David reminded Saul of that as politely as he could. History is not a treadmill, nor is one individual a carbon copy of another. We can give our children a certain "feel for life," a sense of what is right and wrong, ☹ We can "train them up in the way they should go," that is, we can point them in the right direction, but as far as fitting our children out with the specific armor they will need, this is their sacred responsibility. ^{JP} David had obviously done his adolescent growth ^{work} rather thoroughly before this moment. For example, religion was not a secondhand tradition as far as he was concerned. He had obviously come to terms very personally with this strange God of Israel called Yahweh. He had moved from the "what-I've-been-taught" stage to the "what-I-believe" stage,

and this only occurs when one is encouraged "to ask and to seek and to knock." If we fall in a faint the first time a teenager expressed doubt or begins to search, we hinder the very processes that leads eventually to mature faith. This is a point where "letting up" on indoctrination and stepping back to make room for growth is essential. David had also begun to know himself -- where the shape of his individuality began and where it left off. He had tested his skills in "the-give-and-take-of-life." Long before his parents had begun to remove their protective shell and allowed him to go to work and face the wilds of the desert. In that process he had come to understand something of what the world out there was like and how he himself was equipped to cope with it. Thus, in that moment before the King, David did what every adolescent has to do -- he took responsibility for his own life and asked for the right to meet a challenge with his own resources and ingenuity. Right here is the climactic moment in the high drama called adolescence -- when the young person has the courage "to leave father and mother" and walk forward ^{on his own} toward the giant called life ~~on~~ ~~his own~~, and the parents have the courage to let the beloved one go with the sling and staff of his own choosing. ^{HP} It is hard to say which of these two challenges requires the most courage. It ~~never~~ ^{never} is easy for any of those involved. Just imagine what must have been going through David's mind as he stepped out there alone before that nine-and-a-half foot monster? And how must Saul and David's

brothers have felt as they watched David move into that ravine? Let's face it, "the valley of the shadows of adolescence" is a scary time and place, but we might as well face the fact that ^{there} There is no way around it! David never could have become ^{what he did} apart from this kind of experience. All parties concerned functioned well in this moment, and this became a building block for the legendary career that was to follow. The relationship between David and his sources stretched and expanded that day without snapping or exploding. The intimacy appropriate of childhood grew into a different kind of intimacy -- that of an interdependent adult with adults. David had the courage to take the responsibility for his own existence from his parents, but as he walked forward into the world, he did not walk away from a continuing relationship with his sources. He remembered that in a real sense he was able to see as far as he could because he was standing on the shoulders and the accomplishments of his sources. By the same token, his parents and Saul had the courage "to let up" without "letting go" of David altogether. They stepped back at the appropriate time, but they did not walk out on the relationship completely. This is essential, for adolescence is not one dramatic experience and then it is over; most of the time it involves a series of forays into the world and then coming back wounded and bleeding in need of healing and reassurance. Not every adolescent does as well against the giants of the world as David did. Jesus told once of a younger son who decided

to launch out on his own and it proved disastrous. Unlike David, this young man had not done his homework -- he did not know himself or the world and he wound up losing everything in the far country. His first reaction was to run home and try "to climb back into the womb." He had had his fill of freedom. What he wanted now was the security of being a hired servant, of having someone else to make all the decisions for him. Luckily for him, the father who had "let up" and stepped back had not "let go" or "walked out" on his son completely. When the lad came limping home defeated by life, the father refused to let him re-enter dependency. He showed him compassion, but then called for a robe and a ring and some shoes to symbolize the adulthood to which this one was called. In other words, his parenting responsibility continued long after the adolescent left for the first time. And this is how it should be. Alan Patron summarized the stance of the parent beautifully in these words: "I see my son wearing long trousers; I tremble at this. I see he goes forward confidently, he does not know so fully his own gentleness. Go forward, eager and reverent child, see here, I being to take my hands away from you. I shall see you walk carelessly on the edge of the precipice, but if you wish, you shall hear no word come out of me. My whole soul will be sick with apprehension, but I shall not disobey you. Life sees you coming, she sees you come with assurance toward her. She lies in wait for you. She cannot but hurt you. Yet go forward.

Go forward. I hold the bandages and ointment ready. And if you would go elsewhere and lie alone with your wounds, I shall not intrude upon you. If you would seek the help of some other person, I will not come forcing myself upon you. If you should fall into sin, innocent one, that is the way of this pilgrimage. Struggle against it, nor for one fraction of a moment concede its dominion. It will occasion you grief and sorrow, it will torment you. But hate not God, nor turn from Him in shame or self-reproach. He has seen many such, and His compassion is as great as His creation. Be tempted and fall and return. Return and be tempted and fall, a thousand times and a thousand, even to a thousand thousand. For out of this tribulation there comes a peace, deep in the soul and surer than any dream."

And that, in the end, is the hope that illumines this valley of transition called adolescence. "Out of this tribulation" can come a peace, a wholeness, a magnificent human being like David. As Dobson pointed out in the beginning, there is something painful to everybody in this time of "indigestion, heartburn and trauma." But it can be endured; yea, "the valley of the shadow of adolescence" can be walked through to the light on the other side. But in order to do so, everybody involved faces a challenge. For the parents, it is learning "to let up" without "letting go;" to step back without walking out on the relationship. For the adolescent it is learning to

pick up what is being laid down, and walking forward without walking away from one's sources.

Stretching and expanding a relationship so that everything becomes bigger, without snapping or

exploding the bond -- this is the challenge adolescence poses before us all. May God give us

courage, like David long ago, to face into this particular challenge, and by His grace "grow on

through."

So let it be! Amen.