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Concerns and Crises I

*"The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the refuge of my life;
of whom then should I go in dread?
For he will keep me safe beneath his roof
in the day of misfortune;
He will hide me under the cover of his tent;
he will raise me beyond reach of distress.
Wait for the Lord; be strong, take courage,
and wait for the Lord."*

Psalm 27:1, 5, 14 (NEB)

In the course of life, there are problems. In the next two chapters we will discuss some problems of life that come to everyone and some that come to only a few. These are problems that parents and children have to live through. They are problems that can cause difficulties—that parents may have a hard time helping children understand.

The problems we will discuss involve the five religious experiences we have talked about. The *experience of covenant* is involved as we try to rely upon the trust we have built with our children as we experience troubled times. When trust is strong,

then families can handle times of stress better. *Law and limits* are involved as we try to handle new situations and meet one person's need within the limits of another person's need. *Redemptive love* is deeply involved in all these experiences as we love and forgive one another and accept all the negative feelings expressed during difficult times. *Worship and creation* are involved as we learn more about God and His creation, and as we seek God's help during crisis situations.

Common to all the problem areas that we will consider are some ways of helping children live with a problem. The first thing parents must do is to be honest with their children about what is happening, whether the situation is a move, a visit to the doctor, or a death in the family. The children need to know what has happened or is going to happen. They need to know why their usual routine is different. Young children sometimes think that they have caused some frightening event such as death or illness.

Daniel's mother explained that she had discovered why Daniel cried so much when he got a shot at the doctor. He thought he was being punished for being sick. He thought his angry feelings made him sick. Today he said, "If I don't get mad any more, will you tell the doctor not to give me any more shots?" She tried to explain to him that the shot would help him get well. He said, "But if I don't get mad, then I won't get sick, will I?" Then she had to talk to him about how feelings do not cause illness.

The second thing to do to help children adjust is to give them time to get used to the idea of change. Sometimes this is possible and sometimes it is not. Death often comes suddenly, and there is not time to prepare for it. But with new babies, for instance, there is time to tell children what will happen and let them think about and ask questions about the change before it happens.

Allowing time before a change takes place gives children a chance to do the third thing . . . to express their feelings about the change. Sometimes in a stress situation, it is hard for us to allow our children to express feelings which might be negative. It is important to the whole family's adjustment for children and adults to express negative and positive feelings about the change.

When Glenn's father told him that he would be changing jobs and that the family would have to move in a few weeks, Glenn reacted, "I want to finish kindergarten here first."

"I'm sure you do, Glenn," responded his father. It's hard to

leave your friends when you have just started this school year."

"Daddy, I don't want to move!" said Glenn tearfully.

"I know, son, it's hard to move." said his father.

"Will we still be here for Halloween? Will I get to wear my tiger costume?" Glenn asked.

"Yes, I'm sure we will be here that long," his father said.

Glenn's father did not try to reason with him—to explain away his angry feelings, by telling him all the advantages of moving. He wasn't ready for that. He needed at first to express his anger and sorrow.

It is hard for us as adults to accept children's negative feelings about something we are happy about such as a new baby or a move. Sometimes it is hard for us to accept children's negative feelings when we also have negative feelings that we are trying not to express. But feelings need to be expressed. Negative feelings lose their destructive power when expressed and accepted. Don't be afraid to express your feelings and help your children to express theirs.

After feelings are expressed, parents and children can think more rationally about the situation. Glenn had time.

The fourth thing to do for children is to involve them in any preparations for the change. Children can help prepare for a new baby or help pack for a move. In our moving around, friends have sometimes asked if it would help if my children stayed with them rather than at home on moving day. I always refuse their kind offer saying that I would rather have my children underfoot and involved in the moving process, gaining some understanding of what is happening. It is easier for them when they see all our possessions go in the moving truck and all of them come out again at our new house.

Preparing for a New Baby

The birth or adoption of a baby into the family is both exciting and traumatic to everyone in the family. It can be very upsetting to the children already in the family because the baby will seem to be displacing the older children. Parents are challenged at this time to strengthen the covenant with their other children and help them understand love is not divided, but enlarged, by a new member of the family. We need to let each of our children know that he or she is a valuable person, to the family and to

God. Help them understand that the baby will be a valuable person also.

It is important to tell the older children at least two or three months before the birth of the baby if they don't ask before.

Elizabeth learned very early that she would become a sister.

"This afternoon, Elizabeth, Daddy is going to stay with you while I go to the doctor," said Elizabeth's mother.

"What's wrong with you, Mommy?" asked Elizabeth.

"Nothing," replied her mother, who was delighted to be pregnant. "Your daddy and I think that I'm going to have a baby. I'm going to the doctor to find out if she thinks so, too."

"Will you bring the baby home today?" asked Elizabeth.

"Oh, no" her mother replied. "It takes a baby a long time to grow big enough to be born."

Elizabeth found out about the baby so early that its coming didn't mean much to her when she was told, because she was informed and involved in the preparations.

Involving the other children in the family in the preparation for the baby can help them feel that they are still important to you as well as feeling more grown-up. One way of involvement is to let the other children participate in determining where the baby will sleep or be bathed. Many times the arrival of a baby will mean that children must share a room or give up their baby bed or high chair. Since the children will perceive the baby as taking their place to some extent, we need to be sensitive to which equipment will be needed and how the children feel about the baby "taking" it.

Mrs. Thomas was trying to be sensitive to four-year-old Andy's feelings about this baby that was going to intrude into their lives. One day she asked Andy, "When the baby comes, will it be all right if he or she uses your playpen?"

"What playpen, Mommy?" inquired Andy. "I don't have a playpen!"

"Remember that thing with mesh sides that folds? You used to sleep in it when we went to Granny's?" reminded his mother.

"Oh, yeh," replied Andy thoughtfully.

She got the playpen out of the closet and set it up. Andy played with it for a while—climbing in and out and pretending to take a nap. Soon he climbed out and said, "Yeah, that would be good for the baby to sleep in."

Andy was old enough and far enough away from his babyhood that he was not threatened by the baby's use of his old playpen. He had even forgotten about it. His mother made him feel more included by asking his permission to use it. Of course she would have had to be prepared for Andy to say "no." Adults should not ask children yes or no questions when the children really do not have the option to say "no". If a "no" answer had not been an option then a statement or a question such as, "Andy, we will need to use the playpen for the baby. How do you feel about that?" should be used instead. Parents should be prepared to empathize with negative feelings if they come.

The younger the children are, the harder it will be for them to give up using some equipment such as high chairs or baby beds. When children are born close together, parents should be prepared, if possible, to buy duplicate equipment or improvise in some way.

Brothers and sisters can accept babies when they understand what they can do. Explaining babies' helplessness can help children adjust to the demands an infant makes on the family.

Allison was excited about the new baby.

"I will be glad when the baby comes," said Allison to her mother. "We can play house, and the baby can be the baby and I can take care of her—or him."

"Well, Allison," began her mother, "the baby won't be able to play house with you for a long time. Babies are very helpless when they are first born. They can't even hold their heads up.

"But," Allison shook her head. "I'm going to have a little baby brother or sister that I can play with. Grandma said so!"

"Yes," replied her mother, "but the baby will have to grow some before he or she can play with you. You can help me take care of the baby and begin to make friends right away."

Adults need to be honest with children about what newborn infants are like. Some infants do sleep all the time, but others cry at night and during the day. We need to tell our children that infants are very demanding—that they will take up lots of our time—but that things will change as the baby grows.

Parents may need to let the housework routine be more relaxed in order to spend time with the children and with one another. It is very important to spend time alone with the older children when a baby is born because they will feel somewhat

replaced anyway. Take a few minutes to read to the child or to play with them. Be honest about your fatigue and your job and your children will be able to be honest about their feelings.

As the baby grows, we can help the older children adjust to a crawling or toddling baby. John complained to his mother that his baby sister was bothering his block play. His mother suggested that he give her a few blocks to play with because she just wanted to be big like him and do what he was doing. Mother's advice helped John understand his sister and relate to her better. He was proud that his sister wanted to be like him.

Sometimes it helps children work out their feelings about the new baby if you can give them some new, more grown-up privilege such as staying up a few minutes later. Usually we tell children that they are growing up but we need to prove it by giving them some privileges.

No matter how carefully we prepare our children for the birth of a baby, they will feel jealousy and some fear. For the child closest in age to the baby, its coming is a scary experience because his or her position in the family is being intruded upon in many uncertain ways. All young children will feel unsure that the most important relationships they have—those with their parents—will ever be the same. Don't be surprised if your children regress to baby-like ways or develop new fears. Some children want a bottle like the baby. Other children are suddenly afraid of the dark.

We can help with the child's scary feelings about the baby by letting them know that we accept their negative feelings. We can share our own feelings of fatigue and annoyance and let our children know that their feelings are all right. We can give them a doll on which to beat out their jealous feelings—or any of the other ways I have already mentioned.

Questions about the growth and birth of the baby will probably come during the pregnancy. These questions need to be simply and honestly answered. Young children frequently ask how the baby got into the mother. An answer such as, "It grew in a special place called the uterus" is sufficient. Children are also very curious about how the baby will get out of the mother when it is time. Many times we are unsure how to answer. We can say something like "Mothers have an opening in their bodies that is very stretchy. When it is time for the baby to be born, it will

stretch big enough for the baby to come out." This is a true answer that will satisfy the children without going into more detail than they can understand or need at this time.

Preparing for and accepting a baby into the family requires a strengthening and expanding of our covenant relationship with our children. We need to let them know that we still love them as much as we always have. They will still be as valuable to us as they have always been. Redemptive love is necessary when children express the normal negative feelings present when a baby comes. Limits may need to be readjusted but firmly set when the children are out of bounds. Living the faith with young children is important while getting ready for the baby. This experience can strengthen the trust between you.

Jealousy and Sibling Rivalry

Brothers and sisters of all ages will sometimes be jealous of one another. This is normal because jealousy is normal. When children must share parents they may feel rivalry with their brothers and sisters. Many children also feel a jealousy of their parents' relationship.

The feeling of jealousy comes when a person feels disadvantaged. The disadvantage may be real or imagined, but the feeling is real. Our feelings are often not logical. Bonnie, who is healthy, may feel jealous of her brother, Tommie, who is sick. Bonnie's mother may see her feelings as illogical, but the mother does have to give Tommy special attention because of his illness and find ways to show Bonnie she is loved equally.

Jealousy is normal, but it is not healthy when it is the main theme in a family—or of one child in the family. Parents need to do what we can to create an atmosphere in the family that reduces competition and jealousy. We can do this by helping each person in the family, adults and children alike, feel like valuable persons—like unique children of God. The relationship between parents sets the emotional tone for the children.

Mrs. Smith kept a careful account of how much money her husband spent on himself and demanded that equal money be spent on something personal for her. She did this whether the family could really afford it or not. At the same time she could not understand why her children were continuously concerned about how much money was spent on each other.

Comparison of children promotes jealousy. Remarks like "Your sister Angela was toilet trained in just a few weeks. Why can't you do the same?" makes Angela's brother feel bad about himself. They also make him feel that his parents love her more because she has pleased them. It supports the idea that children must earn their parents' love. A parent's love needs to be unconditional as God's love for us is unconditional.

Rivalry can have some constructive effect, however. Lessons of sharing and compromise can be learned by brothers and sisters that an only child must learn outside the family. Brothers and sisters learn through experience that love increases rather than decreases when it is shared.

"Daddy, would you do something with me before bedtime?" begged Vicki.

"Hey! That's not fair!" exclaimed her older brother Lee. "Dad, you promised you'd play my new game with me."

"Please, Daddy," Vicki smiled sweetly at her father.

"Dad, you always do what Vicki wants!" exclaimed Lee.

"Well, let's see," began their father, "what can we do about this? Vicki wants me to do something with her. Lee wants me to play with him."

"Lee won't let me even touch his new game," complained Vicki. "He says it's too hard for me."

"Are you interested in his game?" asked their father. Vicki nodded.

"I think we can compromise," said father. "I want you to listen to the whole idea before you say anything. Vicki, a compromise is when both people get some of what they want but both people don't get all of what either wants. I suggest we get Lee to set up the game while I give you a bath, Vicki. Then you can come down and watch Lee and I play the game. Then Lee will wait for me while I read to you."

Both children thought about their father's suggestion.

"I want to play the game!" demanded Vicki.

"You're too young!" exclaimed Lee. "It says on the box seven and up."

"Could we let Vicki play around with some of the pieces we're not using?" ventured their father.

"Yeh, that would be all right because then we wouldn't have to wait for her to learn all the rules," agreed Lee.

"I want to play with the pieces!" said Vicki smiling.

This incident was filled with potential for rivalry between the children over their father's limited time at home. But he was able to help them solve the problem to everyone's satisfaction and help the children learn something about how to solve conflicts.

Sometimes when our children feel disadvantaged their jealousy will show up in disguise. It will be hard for parents to be aware that the child's behavior is a result of jealousy. It may look like increased dependency when a new baby is born. Since this new dependent person is getting so much attention, the older children want to get the same attention by being helpless or asking for a bottle. Jealousy can take the form of misbehavior.

Bonnie was jealous of the time her mother spent taking care of her sick brother. She began to misbehave so that her mother would notice her. Jealousy can also take the form of increased demand for things. Here again the child was saying, "Look at me! I am a person. Spend time with me." Usually it is focused attention that the child wants rather than things. Jealousy is normal and can be constructive, but too much may be destructive.

Illness

Illness can be very frightening to young children because they can't understand what is happening to their bodies or because they are afraid of the treatment. Symptoms such as diarrhea or vomiting can frighten children because their bodies seem out of control. Children who are being or have just mastered toilet training may be especially upset by diarrhea because they seem to have failed miserably in their attempt to control their bowels. Parents need to reassure the children that both of these illnesses were caused by germs that can be treated. We need to try to prevent making the children feel bad about making a smelly mess. It is smelly and it is a mess, and we should admit this to the children but not make them feel guilty about it.

Children are usually frightened by injections or shots. Shots do hurt and doctors and nurses are beginning to admit that they do. We need to be very sure that our children understand why the shot is needed. We can say that a DPT booster shot will keep them from getting three different diseases. We can explain that a shot of antibiotics will put medicine straight in their blood and

help their bodies fight off the germs that are making them sick. Children may be angry and feel trapped when they have no choice about a shot or a blood test. They may cry.

My kindergartner always screams when she has her finger pricked for a blood test. I tell her that she may express her anger by crying, but that she must let the technician prick her finger. It is hard for any of us to submit our bodies to a painful process. We should let our children at least express their dislike of the situation.

Sometimes, of course, young children enjoy so much the special treatment they get while they are sick that they don't really want to get well. What should this kind of behavior tell parents? That the child needs more focused attention from the parents? The child needs to be encouraged to return to less dependent ways as the parents continue to give them some special attention each day.

Our Friend the Doctor

We can help our children with visits to the doctor by talking to them ahead of time about where they are going, when, and why. Be honest about what will happen. If you aren't sure, say so or ask when you make the appointment. Allow the child to express their feelings about the visit either verbally or through playing doctor with dolls. Allow your children time to get used to the idea of going to the doctor. If you know your child will have to have a shot, tell them before they go to the doctor. Then they can get used to the idea.

We can teach our children that doctors are their friends. They are there to help children get well and to keep them well. We can begin by choosing a doctor who is sensitive to children's feelings as well as skillful in the practice of medicine. Doctors who remember that their very young patients are persons with feelings can reduce the children's fears and get more cooperation from them.

When Dr. Howard talked to Stephen and his father about Stephen having surgery, he turned to Stephen and talked directly to him. He told Stephen what to expect and asked him if there were any questions. Four-year-old Stephen was too shy to ask any, but he trusted Dr. Howard and would probably ask questions later.

Going to the Hospital

Hospitalization is frightening to everyone, but especially to young children. Having to stay overnight in the hospital takes them away from their bed, familiar surroundings, normal routine, and familiar food and family. Many times they are in the hospital for surgery, tests, or a broken bone. There may be pain involved. We need to prepare our children as much as possible for what will happen.

The things we mentioned before: honesty, time to accept the situation, expression of feelings, and participation in getting ready are all very important in preparing young children for hospitalization. Find out as much as you can about the hospital routine before your child goes. Ask the doctor to tell your child exactly what will happen.

Imaginative play also helps a child prepare to go to the hospital. This play could be with dolls, with friends, or with a parent.

Ann-Marie was going to have her tonsils out in a few days. Her mother and her doctor had both talked to her about what to expect. She was very interested in playing doctor before she went to the hospital. When her friend Mike came to play she said, "Let's play going to the hospital. I'll be the doctor first and take out your tonsils. Then you can be the doctor and take out my tonsils."

Once in the hospital, plan to ask all the questions you can about the hospital routine and shift changes. Sometimes the many people coming in and out of the room are confusing to a child who is worried anyway. Sometimes parents and hospital workers are thinking only about the child's physical condition or are concerned only that the child cooperate with them. Sometimes they forget to be sensitive to the child's emotional needs also.

Todd had just had his tonsils out and was back in his room. He wakened enough to see his mother sitting beside him. He began to cry and tried to climb into her lap. His mother wondered if getting out of bed might be against hospital rules, but she gathered him in her lap and held him. Just then a nurse came in and looked with surprise to find Todd in his mother's lap rather than in bed.

"What is he doing?" she asked.

"He woke and wanted me to hold him," replied Todd's mother.

"Well, it's too soon for him to be out of bed, but I guess the best medicine for him now is his mother," conceded the nurse.

"Thank you," said Todd's mother as the nurse left.

Todd's mother had gone against the usual hospital procedure to meet Todd's emotional needs.

If your child is in the hospital, do try to stay with the child if the rules permit. Many hospitals allow or even require a parent to be with the child. Having a parent there gives the child someone that she or he trusts to cling to during a frightening experience.

When Parents Are Ill or Hospitalized

Children can be frightened and bewildered when one of their parents is very ill or hospitalized. One of the persons they depend on so much is suddenly dependent or absent. When illness comes on suddenly or an accident happens, there is little or no time to prepare children. Mother or father may suddenly be in bed or in the hospital. The usual routine is upset. Children may even have to stay with another family. This is a time that tests the strength of the covenant relationship of the family—the basic trust that is there.

When Jill's mother had the flu, Jill walked home from kindergarten by herself since her mother couldn't meet the bus at the corner as usual. Her father came home to fix lunch and then Jill "took care of" her mother during the early afternoon by bringing her drinks of water or ginger ale and just keeping her company. Jill may have worried about her mother's inability to care for her. She may have even been angry at her for not being able to cook and wash as usual. Jill did feel very grown up during that week, however. She found that she could do many things she didn't think she could do.

When a parent is in the hospital, it is hard for young children since hospitals do not allow young children to visit. The parent can telephone or send notes to the children to reassure them.

If a child's mother is in the hospital to have a baby, then the child may have a double concern. He or she will be concerned over the absence of mother as well as the entrance of the new baby into the family.

Illness or hospitalization is a time that requires trust and

understanding of everyone in the family. Special consideration for some people in the family may be required. Redemptive love is necessary when feelings are strong.

Moving

Susie's family, who had recently moved, bowed their heads for prayer before dinner. Susie's father prayed for their family and for others and thanked God for their food. When he was through, Susie added, "And please let us go home." This was her feeling that day about having left the only home she had ever known and the only friends she'd ever known.

Moving is disruptive; it is hard. It is hard even if the family has been unhappy and the move will bring relief from that unhappiness. Young children cannot imagine living elsewhere.

Moving is also a time when there is usually some stress on parents to get things packed, to sell a house or to find a new one. It is a time when meeting our children's needs is hard because we have so much to do and our own feelings may be involved.

Moving is also fun and adventurous. Usually husbands and wives have some time away from their work to prepare for moving. Rarely does the whole family have the opportunity to work together, but when you are moving, the possibility is there. Finding a new house in a new town is an adventure. Discovering what is in a new town or neighborhood can be an adventure. What stores are there? What parks? What interesting people live in the neighborhood? Every location has its uniqueness.

Tony was asked if he liked his new home. He replied, "Yes, we have sidewalks here so I can ride by tricycle better, and I don't have to share a room with my baby sister. But we had so many big shady trees at our old house. I miss them."

Preparing for a Move

What do we need to do to prepare our children for a move?

We should be honest about the fact that moving is both hard and fun—both happy and sad. We need to try to put ourselves in our children's place and think of all the things a move will mean for them. What will they lose? What will they gain?

We need to give children as much time as we can to adjust to the idea of the move. Even though very young children don't understand the meaning of three weeks from now or six months

from now, we should begin to talk to them about the move as soon as we begin to make preparations for it. When we begin to pack or to clean up the house to be sold, the children will notice and want to know why. We should tell them before they have to ask.

Young children may even be involved in selecting a house.

The Brown's were in the process of making a decision about the house they wanted to buy in the town to which they were moving. They called their realtor and told him that they wanted to see the house once more before they decided for sure. The family drove the few miles to the new town. The realtor was surprised to see the children with them. "We felt they should participate in this decision since it will be their house also," said Mr. Brown.

Soon the realtor said, "But they're not even in the house now. They are running around in the back yard."

"Yes, but they gave the house a quick once over before they went outside," commented Mrs. Brown. "They are participating in their own way."

Later the children came inside and inspected the bedrooms to decide which one each of them wanted. Their father asked, "Well, kids, do you think you would like to live in this house?"

"Yeh, it's neat!" they both replied.

After the Move

The moving process is so demanding and exciting that after the move there may be a real let-down. Everyone is tired from moving, but those boxes are still there to be unpacked. Friends and familiar places seem far away, and loneliness is very real. It is important to recognize the loneliness and talk about it. Parents can share with children so they will know they are not alone in their feelings.

It is important not to be overcome by the loneliness. Some neighborhoods are friendly, but some people are so preoccupied with their own lives that they don't come to meet new people. You may have to make a real effort to make new friends. Help your children by creating opportunities to meet children in the neighborhood. Sometimes it takes a parent knocking on a door to bring two children together.

Go to church on Sunday. Find out what small groups are there

that you would enjoy. Tell the minister you are new. Take time to ask about the kinds of church school classes available for adults. In most places now there are classes designed to meet a variety of needs. Look beyond the church to the community, and go to a group that sounds interesting. It is scary to go to a group that is all new; but that may be the way to make yourself known in your community. You may want to enroll your children in a nursery school class or a Parents' Day Out program. This will give both you and your children some social contact.

Things to Think About

1. Review the four suggestions for parents to do in preparing a child for change. Think through and practice the four steps in preparing your child for a move, a new baby, or illness.
2. Make your list of suggestions of things you can do to have more time to help a young child feel secure and loved when a new baby comes to your house.
3. What are some symptoms a young child may show in adjusting to a new baby?
4. How can parents help limit jealousy among their children? Cite some instances of jealousy among your own children.
5. Think about the possibility of your being hospitalized. Plan for your children's needs—physical and emotional. Make a list of the things you need to do. How will you prepare your children for this experience?
6. If you are planning a move, decide how your children can help and what you need to do to make this an easier adjustment.