

The Almost Father: What I Was Going to Say...But She Came Early

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The title of my message this weekend is, *The Almost Father*. I have looked forward to this message for months and was scheduled to deliver it the weekend of June 8. That was to be the perfect weekend because my wife Jennifer and I were on track to deliver our first child, a daughter, that next week. All my plans were set. Everything was going to go down perfectly.

Then on the morning of June 6, I awoke to my wife Jennifer standing in the bedroom. I said, "Everything okay?" She said, "I think I'm having contractions and I've had them since 2:30." Up I jumped out of bed, made a few calls, and we were off to the hospital. We arrived; they checked Jennifer and said, "You are having a baby today."

Indeed we did and here's our little cutie pie:



Kiralee Camille DeWitt. 7 lbs, 13 ounces. 19 inches of cuteness.

I was there for the whole birth and Jennifer did amazing. After seeing that, I'd just like to go on record with how happy I am to be a man.

We announced the name to our family first. Let me just tell you the story to save telling it a couple thousand times. When we found out we were pregnant, we went out for dinner to

celebrate and try to get our sanity back. One of the first things we talked about was picking out a name. For months we created a carefully researched hot list of the best names. Bible names. Church hero names. Family names. Any name we heard and liked. Months ago a pastor in England read my book and reached out to me to talk about it. He was writing a dissertation on beauty for an advanced degree and so we connected. In the course of getting to know him, we discovered his wife's name was Kiralee. We both thought, *Wow, that's pretty*. So we put it on the list. As the countdown got closer, we were still deciding. As we talked, Kiralee kept moving up the charts. We had a name or two that from the beginning we were pretty sure we would use, but in the end, Kiralee was just so elegant and feminine that it leapfrogged to our top choice. Camille is a generational middle name in Jennifer's family including Jennifer, so that was a lock.

Choosing a name is way more stressful than I would have thought. It makes you wonder how Adam named all the animals on day 6. "*What should I call you? Elephant or Hippopotamus?*"

Perhaps this is one early lesson in fatherhood—children don't really care about your plans. However in our case, we should have known. Kiralee has Dutch blood and, of course, the Dutch are always early.

I really wanted to do *The Almost Father* message, so I'm doing it after her birth with the subtitle, *What I Was Going to Say...But She Came Early*.

My Story

I have pastored here for so long that most of you not only know my story but have lived my story with me. I need to explain though, how I became *The Almost Father*. By the way, some of you will want to argue that I was a father at conception. Yes. True. Okay. Just go with it. The story really goes back to when I was a boy. My mom's and dad's fathers died when they were children. Neither of them grew up with consistent fatherliness in the home. I think this produced a very motivated dad for me and a mom who wanted male leadership in the home. That was a blessing to us and to me.

I'm hoping there is a truth here. The training of good dads begins when they are sons of good dads. However, my dad is proof that you don't have to have a dad to be a good dad.

Christian teaching says that you should be married before you become a dad and as you probably know, it took me a long time to get married. 44 years. This meant it took me a long time to become a dad. The yearning to have children was always there, but these last years have been especially hard during the holidays or on Father's Day. It's great to celebrate marriage and children but we have to also realize that's not God's plan for everyone and often things in life don't go the way we want. That was me, the Bachelor Pastor. As the Senior Pastor of the church, I was quietly struggling in the same group as the other singles who long for a family. I could identify with the married couples who desire kids but struggle with infertility or some other issue. That's life and that's where the rubber of faith hits the reality of the road. Life is often NOT the way we want it to be.

The church is called to minister to all categories and I always chafe when the church acts like everybody's married and everybody has kids and everybody has a well-behaved dog at home. The Bible doesn't require marriage or kids or a dog to be in God's will. The biblical ideal is faith lived out in this broken world in all the broken categories we find ourselves in. Further, when we promote the idea that these categories can be our ultimate sources of happiness, we damage our core message which is that Christ is our treasure and source of

joy. These good things are the easiest idols of all and produce girls who have to have a man to be happy and couples who have to have children to sense God's favor. In my Bachelor Pastor message before I got married, I told you I wasn't looking to Jennifer to be my ultimate source of happiness. Similarly, I am not looking to Kiralee to be that either. Neither of them are my Savior. Neither of them died for me. Neither of them is God.

I want to share five longings I have as a dad to her. This message is more biography than exposition but I think these longings are all biblical and I hope move us toward a deeper appreciation for what it means be a dad.

Five Longings of *The Almost Father*

By God's grace, to be a biblical father to her

The natural question is *what is a biblical father?*

Fatherhood is part of the very beginning of the creation story, and even before that. The true beginning of fatherhood is the role and title of the head of the Triune Godhead. God the Father functions and relates to the other two members of the trinity as self-identified "father." Fatherhood is therefore sacred and holy. God relates to humanity in general as Father while his fatherliness is expressed fully to all who trust in Christ as Savior. By faith we become sons and daughters of God. Father is a title, a role, and a relationship. God is Father, functions as a father, and relates to his children with fatherliness and nurturing love.

As God has done in so many ways, God built into the very fabric of this world a created reflection of that divine fatherliness. Earthly fathers. This is what he said to Adam and Eve, *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it."* (Genesis 1:27-28, ESV)

God created sexuality and commanded reproduction and filling of the earth. This is known as *the creation mandate*. God wanted Adam and Eve to have kids. So children and parenting children were part of God's plan for humanity. God calls all creation "very good" and that includes the sexuality of Adam and Eve, marriage, family, and Adam's title, role, and relationship as father. It is all very good!

Scripture affirms this elsewhere, *Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.* (Psalm 127:3-5)

The fifth commandment honors the parent/child relationship, *"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.* (Exodus 20:12)

Jesus honored children and said they are a kind of litmus test of whether we see people the way God sees them. *And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."* (Mark 9:36-37) Jesus doesn't measure children's value by their wealth, intellect, contribution to commerce or society, he values them through the eyes of God and says, *they are so valued by God that to honor them is to honor me.* Why? They are image-bearers of the Most High God and objects of God's care and favor.

Definition of a biblical father - *A biblical father provides, loves, and nurtures the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of his child with the goal of the child's faith and maturity in Christ.*

I have anxiety about this. That's terrifying. How is little old me going to do that? By God's grace.

By God's grace, to love her despite her (and my) imperfections

I am somebody who naturally likes to figure things out in advance. I like to plan. To fix things. I view problems as things to be solved. I like to anticipate outcomes and steer things toward the desirable outcomes. I am definitely on the proactive side of the personality spectrum.

One of the most surprising anxieties I have had during pregnancy is the simple fact that you really don't know what's coming out. It's safe to say it's human. Ultrasounds can tell you gender. Past that you don't know about her health, her personality, or what her life is going to be and mean and what this will mean for my life. Having a baby is really risky.

I remember the meeting with our doctor we had when she began to list all the birth defects and special need possibilities. She went on to talk about our age and percentage statistics and suggested we do further testing to find out if there are any problems. I am pretty sure this is related to the abortion stuff and the tragic option in our culture to abort special needs children.

Clearly that was not an option for us and we declined the further testing. I have seen parents of Down syndrome children and autistic children and other special needs children. But after that day, I will never "see" them the same again. They too prayed for the health of their child. They hoped for a healthy baby like everybody else but God has given them a special gift that carries with it the need for special grace. As an almost father, my perspective changed and my compassion soared.

You can't fix chromosomes. My wife's pregnancy was a season of great faith testing for me. Hebrews 11:1 says, *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* Do I believe that God is good? Do I believe that God will give us grace for whatever parenting this baby will mean? Do I realize she is born a sinner with all the moral and spiritual brokenness that entails? Do I grasp how much she needs the Holy Spirit in her to obey God from the heart? Do I realize that in this, I am no different than her?

And what is normal anyway? God does his most special work through these special children. Let's not idealize 10 fingers and toes, shape and form, intellect and talent and miss God's special grace in children and families where reality is less than our culture's ideal.

By God's grace, to cultivate biblical femininity by modeling robust masculinity

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul argues that women should be women right down to the way they present themselves and that men should be men as well. There's cultural language there about dress but the underlying principle goes all the way back to Genesis 1:27, God created us male and female.

Those gender distinctions are part of our personhood and his purpose for humanity. Only because of the Fall do you have women trying to be masculine and men being feminine.

How is Kiralee going to become a feminine woman? Having a biblical and feminine woman like Jennifer as her mother will go a long way. Yet I know I have a critical role to play in that. Since femininity is complementary to masculinity, little girls develop their beautiful feminine character by being alongside a strong masculine man. Dad is best in this role but praise God for faithful stand-ins like grandpa or an uncle or a godly man in the church.

Kiralee is going to form her perspective of what it means to be a woman and how to relate to a man largely on the strength of my masculinity in the home. That has nothing to do with having a hairy chest or watching football. ***Biblical masculinity is tender and loving headship that shows itself through sacrificial servant leadership of the home.***

Single gals, this is what you want in a husband. Don't look at his biceps or his bleached teeth; look at the strength of his character and his selflessness. I don't have time to develop this thought but I know the best way to get a strong male servant leader as a son-in-law is for her to admire those same qualities in me. It makes her secure in her femininity. She won't go looking for it in all the wrong places. Dad is in the right place, and if it's God's will, someday she will find those qualities in the arms of her husband.

This relates to the next longing I have....

By God's grace, to be a godly example to her

I believe God is sovereign in salvation but also believe he uses means to accomplish his will. There is no more effective means of making disciples than Christian parents faithfully living out their faith in front of their kids. I was a youth pastor for five years and Senior Pastor for 16. Do you know how many times I have said that, taught that, pounded the pulpit as I did? Now it's my turn. It's kind of like when I went to Franciscan St. Anthony Health for knee surgery a few years ago. I have gone to see people there untold times. When it was my turn to be there it sure felt different. When it comes to being a dad, now it's my shot. My turn. My run at it. Now I have to take a deep breath and ask, *Will my life draw her toward the gospel and love for Christ or push her away from it?* I feel this especially as she is going to grow up hearing me tout all kinds of things from the pulpit. This poor girl will hear hundreds, maybe thousands of my sermons. But she will be different. She will know the real me behind the scenes. What will she see? Will what she sees convince her that Jesus really does change your life?

It's hard to fake out our kids. At church, we are all amazing Christians. Kids don't evaluate our faith based on what they see at church but by what they see at home. I know good and godly Christian parenting is no guarantee of faith for their children. But I do know I can make it hard for her to believe.

This leads to my final longing....

By God's grace, my ultimate goal for her is faith and maturity in Christ

Paul writes this in Ephesians 6:4, *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

There's something not to do—exasperate your child by harsh and domineering parenting. Rather, my parenting aim is to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. I have many "must do's" as a dad. I need to provide for my family. I need to lead as a servant leader in the home. I need to provide care, shelter, education, discipline, etc.

But this is the one statement of what I must do most of all. I must disciple Kiralee. That begins by instructing her regarding spiritual truth. Teaching her the gospel. She is a sinner before a holy God. God loves her. Jesus died for her sins. God will forgive her sins. But she must believe in Jesus as her Savior and follow him with her life. Small children can understand that. I know it because I did. Then I need to continue to teach her, cultivate a heart of service for God, and help her know how to live a life that pleases her heavenly Father.

Of all the longings I have for Kiralee, the biggest one is that I want to enjoy heaven and eternity with her. The thought of her NOT being there is more than my young daddy heart can handle.

Parents, what is your big goal? Have you allowed some other thing to become the big goal? Your daughter is not going to be an Olympic gymnast and your son is not going to play in the NFL or NHL or whatever. Yet so much time and money is poured into these very, very secondary things.

What really matters when it comes to our kids? Valedictorian or eternal life? Athletic success or eternal life? Getting into the right college or eternal life? Amazing trombone player in marching band that takes 3rd place at regionals or eternal life? Our window of time with our kids is so small; why miss the opportunity to focus on cultivating a heart for God and a life lived to his glory?

For every man who wants to be a father, is an almost father, or a current father, what could be more important than partnering with God to reach our children for Christ? That is my goal. I'm not the "almost father" now, she's here. I am the "just starting" father. I have much to learn but I think these longings are grounded in biblical truth and all biblical fathers will long for them too.

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