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DISNEYLAND

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Have your kids ever begged you to take them to Disneyland?

My family and I had the privilege of visiting the self-proclaimed '*happiest place on earth*' a few years ago. It's an amazing place with lots to see and do. The rides, the parades, and of course, Disney characters. The staff go out of their way to make you feel special. We spent days there and had an amazing time.

Near the end of one of the days, we'd scheduled a visit to see Anna and Elsa from the movie, Frozen. This was a big deal! And my daughters were very excited. At the end of the day, after we'd seen the rest of Disneyland and were very tired, we were in a long line waiting to see the popular Anna and Elsa. When it was almost our turn the grumpiness set in. My youngest daughter had had enough. And she was going to let us know about it. To make matters worse, I'd also had enough and my parenting patience had run out. We were grumpy at each other and Disneyland was far from being the '*happiest place on earth*'. My daughter and I didn't know how to control our emotions and the best thing for us to do was to get away from each other for a while until we calmed down.

It's moments like that I realise it's not easy being a parent. The tantrums, the demands and the tiredness can make me wonder if it's all worth it sometimes.

I remember the time when my first child was born. It was an amazing time in my life and it changed me forever. In the build up to the birth, my wife and I went to the prenatal classes and learnt what was about to happen and we got everything ready. We were excited. However, I can't recall receiving any manual on what to do once we took our baby home. That would've been very handy. Sure, there were the basics of how to change a nappy and how to feed the baby. But how do you actually raise a child? A person who totally relies on you for all they need. And not stuff it up. How do you teach a child and ensure that they grow up healthy, strong and happy?

The joy of having a baby certainly brought with it confusion, worry, and many sleepless nights. It's not easy being a parent.

Thankfully we had some great midwives who were willing to show us what to do. Most importantly, they showed us how to love our child and not break her. Holding my daughter in my arms, safe in her blanket, and rocking her to sleep are my cherished memories of that time. It's a nice feeling to do that for someone you love. And it's nice when you're loved in that way too.

God loves us as a loving parent. He holds us close to him and is here to help us grow. God also helped me as a parent. To know that he cared and loved me, helped me face the unknowns of parenting with confidence.

Trusting in God to love and care for me, even when I was stuffing up, helped calm me down and reassure me. Especially when my frustrations boiled over because the baby wouldn't stop crying, again! God helped me take a breath so I could deal with what was going on.

God is a loving parent. More loving than we can ever imagine a loving parent to be. God is always willing to forgive, patient and slow to get angry. Not because of who we are or what we're like. But

because that's who he is. God is loving and kind and even calls us his own dear children. A loving parent gives a sense of belonging and comfort to a child and makes the child feel special. To know that you're loved and have a family helps bring peace and purpose to your life. To be called a child of God is very special. That means we are one of God's intimate family members and we come under his protection and care. God will look after us and treat us as family. He will never leave us or give up on us. He promises us that. That's what it means to be in God's family.

You might be a parent to a child, or you may not, either way, God wants you to be his child. And by being God's child, you have access to all of God's good gifts. Including forgiveness and love. We all need God's love and forgiveness. Just like children have tantrums and want to get their own way, we often want our own way too and often hurt others in the process, including God. At times children may even say they hate their parents. Our relationship with God can be like a rebellious child having a tantrum, wanting our own way and even hating God. To restore the relationship, God comes to us with his forgiveness and love. Like a loving parent kindly calming the rebellious child down and reminding them of their love. God restores our relationship with him through the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It takes an act of sacrifice to break conflict and heal the relationship. By Jesus Christ, God's son, dying on the cross and rising to life, God brings us back into a loving relationship with him. That's how he makes us his loved child. God, our heavenly parent, came to us and paid the sacrifice for us so that we could be his children. That same love of God can empower us to forgive and make peace with our children and to love them, even when they don't deserve it.

Someone once asked me how you stop a line of Dominoes from falling over. The answer is to take one out or hold one up. It takes an act that is not natural. It might go against your emotions and frustrations. It's like saying a kind word to an angry child or not fighting back when they're looking for a fight. This is reflected when a parent sacrifices themselves for their child. It might be that they give up forcing to be right, or sacrifice their expectation of their child, or at least make the first move to be reconnected with their child. The act of sacrifice brings amazing rewards even a healed, restored and joyful relationship.

It wasn't easy for me that day in Disneyland to love my daughter after the way she behaved. However, by sacrificing my wants and expectations out of love for my child, I was able to reconnect with her. And after a round of hugs, we finally enjoyed meeting Anna and Elsa. We really did enjoy Disneyland and thankfully there are many more wonderful memories from that time that make me realise that being a parent is worth it and I love my daughters very much!

Forgiveness and love during tough times of parenting are only possible because of God and his great and saving love for us. Because he has made the first step to us, we can receive his love, live in his love, and reflect that love to our own children and families. By living in God's love and reading how Jesus loves us, we can learn how to love our own children.

I encourage you as a child of God to grow in your relationship with God. And as a parent, love your children and keep taking that first step. God cares about you as a parent and as a child.

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