

savoring childhood



PRACTICAL WISDOM
FOR SLOWING DOWN

grace p. pouch



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PART 5

Slow Growing Up



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TODAY IS HENRY'S FIFTH GRADE DAY CELEBRATION. The festivities include games and class parties, followed by a parade where the fifth graders take a victory lap through the elementary school hallways and weave their way around to the middle school to ceremonially become sixth graders.

On the drive there, Henry was eating a bagel and I was enjoying the ride as a chance to ask him questions and listen to him talk. I always find the conversation flows well with my son when just the two of us are in the car together, and I love hearing my children's perspectives on current events (the big global kind, and the day-in-the-life of an eleven-year-old kind). Sometimes they get annoyed with my more probing questions, but other times they seem to enjoy a chance to share their ideas.

This morning's conversation gave me an inside peek at Henry's views on himself and on childhood.

"Can I ask you your opinion on something?" I began. "I have been wondering about it, and want to hear some children's ideas."

"Do I still count as *children*?" he said, enunciating the word *children* with extra formality. There was a hint of laughter in his voice, but I also detected some genuine uncertainty, given that this was his last day of elementary school.

"Hmmm, I think so," I said, "but let me check. . . . You are not an adult, are you?" We both laughed.

And then he asked about his big sister, "What about Charlotte? Are fifteen-year-olds *children*?"

"Yes, Charlotte is a teenage child, but she is still a child," I reassured him. I was also reassuring myself.

It gave my heart a sudden twinge of anguish to imagine either of my children not being children anymore. This is a bittersweet part of loving young people—they grow up. Eventually this chapter of their lives will be fulfilled, the page will turn, and the next chapter will begin. Sometimes it feels like if I blink, that page will turn before I'm ready.

I know well the sensation of wanting to freeze-frame childhood. The impulse to want to slow it down comes from a good desire to savor the time because we realize that it really doesn't last forever. But growth is beautiful. Jesus the incarnate Son grew up. Becoming an adult didn't corrupt him or drain him of holiness. He didn't lose his imagination or joy by aging. On the contrary, his wisdom, character, grace, and relationships deepened as he grew (see Luke 2:52). It is God's design that humans begin as babies and grow up into adults. There mustn't be a Peter Pan syndrome affecting a Christian view of childhood. Childhood is neither more sacred nor less sacred than adulthood. Every age and stage of human life has equal potential to be lived "to the full"—in harmony with God, others, and the world (John 10:10 NIV).

Having admitted that I know the sensation of wanting to freeze-frame childhood, I should also confess that I know the sensation of wanting to speed up childhood when it feels tough. Isn't it funny that we can hold both of these distorted wishes in our minds—to want to keep children little forever and also to want them to be as mature and self-reliant and accomplished as adults?

Henry's question about whether he was still a child made me laugh, but it actually captures the way many of us feel—unsure about when childhood stops. Is it when they turn double digits? When they drive? When they graduate from high school? Or when their frontal cortex is fully formed? People also seem very unsure about how to help young people take on more mature types of activities and pursuits at a pace that still leaves room for them to be kids.

I am not here to make any claims on the exact boundaries of childhood in terms of years and months. No matter how you measure it, today's young people are not getting the chance to experience childhood "to the full."

At this point in the book, we have looked at four forms of hurry that contribute to the problem. A final form of hurry we must address is rushing kids to grow up too quickly.



Just as we have to stop regretting the progression of childhood and fretting over its brevity in order to sink into and savor it, we also have to beware of taking it for granted or being so focused on clearing milestones that we hurry past formative and beautiful experiences. It's easy to feel exasperated with a child for not having the maturity of an adult. It can try your patience to the point that you think, "Lord, can we just skip *this* part?" Whether it's potty training or middle school mood swings, sitting through a first-year violin concert or sitting in the principal's office to discuss a child's behavior, some parts of childhood feel more like surviving than savoring.

And if I am completely honest, some parts can be boring. Spending quality time with a young child takes so much energy and effort, and some of the responsibilities are as dull as a carpool line (and I think a carpool line might be the universally accepted symbol for *dull*). I can remember playtimes with the kids when they were in preschool. The minutes crawled by as we acted out the same little scenes over and over again with trains or dolls or stuffed animals. Sometimes I would escape to the bathroom or check the weather just for a change in pace! Or I would work something into the plot of our pretending that gave me a rest: "Okay, now pretend like the mommy tiger is sick and needs to lie down here while the baby tiger keeps playing."

There are moments where we might wish (subconsciously) that kids would hurry and grow up. To have the thought is normal. To *act* on it—to discourage a young child from playing in an age-appropriate way or repeatedly asking questions or trying something over and over again—is to actively rush them out of the green pastures where their young souls need to linger.

Another way to spin the top on childhood is to get so focused on securing a child's *future* that her present needs get skipped over. A head start on academics, sports, and other goals is fine unless it turns childhood into a tiny career-building exercise—rushing kids into achievements, commitments, and public exposures so that they don't have the downtime and the anonymity they need to be a kid.



We do not need to prolong, pause, or freeze childhood in order to savor it, but we do need to stop rushing kids toward adulthood. I believe with the Lord's help we can give kids the chance to enjoy childhood "to the full."

This section of *Savoring Childhood* is about giving children access to relationships and experiences that shape a healthy outlook on the world, themselves, and God. So many experiences contribute something essential to that formation, and a few of my favorites—like creative projects and imaginative play—show up in almost every chapter of this book!

Is God good? How do I hear God and talk to God? Where do I belong? What makes me who I am? What is true and trustworthy? These are questions kids are exploring in childhood—not just through Sunday school lessons and catechisms. (Though, as a teacher I certainly believe those are excellent tools. Formal teaching was a part of Jesus' boyhood, and our kids need it too.) But our children need *more* than just formalized instruction to truly know God. They need personal encounters with God's goodness and nearness. And these lessons must not be rushed.

Slowing down the growing-up process puts kids back in touch with all sorts of delightful experiences, including the most important form of savoring—to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8). The next three chapters take us deeper into essential building blocks for a wholesome childhood:

- "Animal Friends" connects young people to the natural world, which draws them into a relationship with God as his beloved children and coworkers in creation.
- "Reading Down" is about sharing stories that root children in truth and belonging.
- "Counterpoints" provides the missing ingredients kids need to connect with God. As we restore balance to our children's lives, they learn to discern what their souls need.

“You are only a child once,” the saying goes. And in a sense, this is true. Some of you may feel that you grew up too quickly to soak in some of childhood’s essential nutrients. But that doesn’t mean that all is lost. The invitations of this book are also for you—because all of us, no matter how old we are, are called by Jesus to “become like children” (Matthew 18:3).

One of Jesus’ students, a man named Nicodemus, asked him the question we all want to know: “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” (John 3:4). We can’t actually go back to kindergarten or relive middle school. (Let’s thank God for that!) Jesus explained to him that the second birth isn’t a physical process. It’s a spiritual one. It is the work of God in our lives that comes not by a physical regression of any kind, but by being humble enough to rethink things. If you have a childlike eagerness to learn and imitate, if you are willing to take all that you believe, want, and do by habit, and offer every bit of it to the Holy Spirit for revision, God will transform you. This is how a person of any age can be born again and “renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

The life lessons and encounters of a slow and spacious childhood lay foundations for an eternity of loving communion with God. You, too, are welcome to meet him here.

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