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Mother
to
Son

LETTERS TO A BLACK BOY ON

IDENTITY *and* HOPE

 INTERVARSITY PRESS | ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com

You Are Mine



Dear Son,

When I found out we were having a boy, I jumped up and down and clapped my hands with glee. Literally. You can see it on video. I shouted a triumphant, “I knew it!”

Both times.

Before I found out about your brother, people warned me that I might be disappointed about not having a girl, but the minute I saw him waving his little . . . sword . . . across that dark, murky screen, a genuine smile spread across my face warming me down to my toes.

Two little boys. All mine.

I have always wanted to be a boy mom. Blame it on the fact that your Uncle Trey was my best friend growing up and that I gained six brothers between my fourteenth and twenty-third birthdays. As a teacher, I have always loved the rowdy boys best of all. In fact, when I found out that I was carrying you, I was teaching a class of twenty-five

seventh- and eighth-grade boys who alternately drove me crazy and gave me some of the most joy-filled days of my career.

I'm sure that if God ever blesses me with a daughter, she will light up my life in the same surprising way my sister did after five of my brothers arrived. And I'll be just as glad to welcome her.

But I'm glad you're a little boy all the same.

I want to begin these letters by telling you how I see you.

I know it's not as important as how God sees you, but as I look into your eyes I realize that I am the very first source of identity you will ever know. You're getting to an age now where we will start catechizing you—teaching you about who made the world, who made you, and why he put you here. But before it all, my heartbeat and voice were the first sounds you ever heard. You were fearfully and wonderfully made by a Creator who knows you more intimately than I ever could—but he made your frame to share mine for nine whole months.

So in these letters, as I explain where you fit into the world, I'm going to take the liberty of beginning with where you fit into your mother's heart.

YOU ARE A MOTHER'S SON

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:1, 14).

I found out I was pregnant again when you were just seventeen months old. Though we lost that little baby early—as we'd lost a little one before the Lord gave us you—I named him “John.” During the five weeks I carried him, the book of John grew incredibly important to me.

The phrase “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” was mind-boggling to me. Growing up in the church, I am familiar with the idea that God became a man, but until John, I hadn’t ever really considered that God became a *baby*—a fragile little life wholly dependent upon his mother, Mary; or that Mary became a *mother*—a fragile human being wholly dependent on God to protect and nurture the baby inside of her.

The first chapter of John is powerful for many reasons. It establishes the Son of God as the Creator of the universe. It proclaims that Jesus is God. It heralds Christ as the light of the world.

I could go on.

But as I’ve carried each of my babies, for me the most mind-boggling part of the passage has become this phrase in verse fourteen: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

The architect of the universe designed my body to bring forth life and then he entered into that process by becoming a mother’s son. The Creator of all things humbled himself by becoming a baby, wholly dependent on his mother for survival.

His flesh was sustained by the intricate processes that takes place in women around the globe. His mother was once a young girl whose body became a living sacrifice for him the same way that my body became a living sacrifice for you. Did she have morning sickness too? Did she put her hand to her stomach to feel him kicking and dancing? How in the world was she able to ride on a donkey while nine months pregnant?

Jesus had a mother. And she was once a pregnant woman. And she went through the pain of labor to bring the Creator of the world into his own creation. Mary and I have a lot more in common than

I sometimes stop to think: we are both women called to the incredible task of submitting our bodies to God’s glorious purpose of bringing life into this world. Jesus became *flesh and blood*—a man, like you’ll become—and it all started in his mother’s body.

When Eve stood trembling before the Father as he proclaimed that her offspring would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15), he was declaring, in part, that the pain that she would experience in childbirth would result in generations of women who would lead to Mary, the woman who bore Christ. The conqueror of the serpent would start his life here on earth as a babe in the arms of a mother. The conqueror of the serpent would begin his life here on earth vulnerable in the womb of a daughter of Eve.

Mothers and sons have been part of God’s redemptive story since the beginning of time. My love for you is the echo of a heart that has been beating for millennia. And it’s purposeful.

YOU ARE A MOTHER’S REDEPTIVE BLESSING

I will never forget that early Sunday morning when I padded into the bathroom and quietly opened the packet of a pregnancy test, trying not to wake your daddy up. We were the epitome of poor newlyweds, living in a five-hundred-square-foot apartment and barely making ends meet. Only a month had passed since our wedding, and we’d experienced what felt like more than our fair share of growing pains.

I still remember the way my hands shook when I saw the word *pregnant*. I don’t know how long I sat there staring at it, willing it to sink in before I flushed the toilet, crawled back into bed, and looked at your daddy with wide eyes.

“You’re pregnant,” he said.

He ruins every surprise like that, by the way.

We were *so* excited about that little baby I was convinced was a boy. Our excitement lasted an entire month before the dating ultrasound revealed a baby measuring about a week too small—a little baby without the thrum of the heartbeat we had expected to hear.

My whole world fell apart.

I had never cried that hard in my life, although I've cried even harder since. My body went from feeling like the habitat for a glorious miracle to a sepulcher.

Your daddy and I sat in the car for several minutes afterwards, holding hands in stunned silence. I don't even remember what he finally said to try and comfort me, but I wasn't having it. I snatched my hand away and shouted, "He's *dead*. He *died*. I am carrying a dead, dead baby."

That sounds macabre, I know. But as a woman who firmly believes that life begins at conception, the fact that my child's heart had stopped beating sliced through me like a knife. I hadn't just lost the hope of motherhood. I already *was* a mother. I had lost my child.

Almost a year later, as I sat in the bathroom clutching a positive test on another Sunday morning, I felt a new twinge of fear. That fear would follow me through every prenatal appointment, but the one where we first heard your heartbeat is the one I will always remember most.

I sobbed as though my heart was breaking, but it wasn't. It was mending. And though you have a sweet life all your own completely separate from the first baby I lost, *you* were the first baby who showed me that my motherhood could be connected to joy instead of pain. You were the redemptive little rainbow after the storm of miscarriage.

I have two rainbow babies now and two babies I never got to meet. I don't pretend to love you more than a mother who has never experienced loss, but my love for you is different. And it's fierce.

YOU ARE THE NEXT STEP IN A LEGACY

My phone number used to belong to your grandfather.

It's been my phone number for ten years now (and I'm refusing to give up that Texas area code), but every so often I'll get a call or text from someone looking for your pappy.

The parallels of that wrong number and my day-to-day life seem endless sometimes. I constantly have people asking me if they can speak with Pappy. It's the cost of having a popular preacher and writer for a dad. But while the scale might vary, any pastor's kid could probably say the same thing. Even as I'm knocking on thirty's door, some see my life as more hidden in Pappy than hidden in Christ.

You don't know it yet, but you've experienced this too. Right after we announced that we were having a son, more than one person asked, "Are you going to name him Voddie Jr.?" To them, it seemed like a completely innocent question, or even a joke. But to me, it felt incredibly disrespectful. I have a husband whose identity was completely bypassed in the name of celebrating celebrity.

On the one hand, I can understand that people are starstruck. I have a really good dad. In a landscape where fatherlessness is *the* political phrase buzzing around little black boys like you, I was not only raised in an intact home, but also by a dad who loves the Lord and has a passion for encouraging other families to seek earnestly after him. It's a gift that I could easily take for granted, but I try not to.

Thanks to my childhood as a homeschool student, he has been one of my favorite teachers, counselors, and confidants. We have a wealth of memories, inside jokes, and well-worn conversation topics. Growing up, he was my biggest advocate, my constant cheerleader, and my rock when the stresses of life overwhelmed me.

Pappy was an amazing earthly example of God’s fatherly love toward his children (Ps 86:5). He protected me (2 Thess 3:3), provided for me (Lk 12:24), patiently instructed me (Ps 25:12), and led our family (Ps 5:8). He did all of these things imperfectly, of course—God is the only perfect Father—but he did them with love, commitment, and diligence. In so many ways, my father is the father I know that your daddy aspires to be for you, just as my mother is the type of mother that I’d love to be.

But my parents are still flawed human beings who aren’t accountable for my walk with Christ. I’m responsible to God for my own obedience. I’m responsible for raising you, not just in the patterns my parents taught me, but in the pattern of Scripture. Their parenting was exemplary in so many ways, but I have an even more exemplary parent to follow in heaven.

And as you grow up in a Christian home with a fantastic grandfather and an even better daddy (says your biased mama), you are going to have to balance your beautiful legacy with your own personal responsibility.

You are the son of two parents who are striving to make a difference in the church. Your daddy is the hardest working man I know and one of the most well-connected men in our city—so much so that if I’m not recognized as “Voddie’s daughter,” I’m certainly known as “Phillip’s wife.” Your mama is planning on sending you to

the school where she teaches, and you'll no doubt be "Jasmine's son" to more than a few there.

I don't want you to despise being known as one of us, but I do want you to know that you are created with individual worth and value before the Father. You were not made to bloom in our shadows.

In Psalms, Solomon tells us that children are like arrows in the hands of a mighty warrior (Ps 127:4). Arrows do a warrior no good if they stay in his quiver. They're made to be launched in battle.

Many people fail to consider that children aren't meant to remain in the shadows of their parents for the rest of their lives. They're made to be launched from their homes where they were trained to bring the good news of Christ Jesus to a hurting world.

All of the teaching and training my parents poured into me was for God's glory. I'm not ultimately a testament of Voddie's faithfulness, but of God's. And he intends not for you to be crafted into my image, but into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29).

YOU ARE THE OLDEST CHILD

You are my firstborn son.

Which means you're a bit of a guinea pig. I'm sorry. But if it makes you feel any better, I know how it feels. I was born in 1990, and my youngest sibling arrived in 2013. His parents are completely different from the bumbling just-turned-twenty-somethings who set out to raise me. They are wiser, more patient, more compassionate, and more directed parents to him than they were to me. Rather than resent him for that, I thank God for the evidence of growth in my parents' lives. If God had chosen, I could have come into the world in 2013 instead of 1990, but he decided in his glorious purposes that I would be raised by the youngins in all of their zeal.

God's purpose for you seems to be a similar track. You have the benefit of my energy as well as the handicap of my ignorance. These letters aren't the how-to of an experienced parent, but the hopes of a first-time mom. As I bungle through these parenting years, you might sometimes wish for a more experienced mama than the one I happen to be, but I'm so very grateful that you don't have her because she wouldn't be me.

This is the first time I've done this. And while I plan to do the very best I can, I know I will fall short sometimes, just like my parents. But I want to love you with the same fierceness with which I was loved and I want to do my very best to submit that love to the patterns I see in the Scriptures.

I hope you will look back on your young mama with grace. But I also hope that you'll look back on me and see a firm resolve to love you well. I hope you'll see some ways that loved you right. I hope you'll see a quickness to repent of the things that I got wrong.

These letters are not a picture of perfect parenthood. They are not the well-crystalized thoughts of a gray-haired, wizened woman. They are the real-time musings of a millennial mama who just tucked you in your highchair for breakfast and begged you for a kiss. They are the current thoughts of a late twenty-something woman who writes with her laptop propped just under a second-trimester baby bump. They aren't the oft-trodden pathways of the past, but a hopeful trailblazing into the future. They're not written for your eyes only, but for the church as well. Not as an expert, but as a layman showing all of her cards.

I ask you for grace in that. I ask them for grace in that. I trust God for grace in that.

YOU ARE A LITTLE BLACK BOY

Just this morning, I watched a video of two cops cuffing a young black man on the side of the road. He hadn't committed a crime. In fact, he was just sitting in the passenger seat of a car. He was riding with his (white) grandmother and her (white) friend, and the police stopped them because they thought he might be robbing those poor older women.

When they pulled the car over, told him to put his hands in the air, cuffed him, and put him in the back of their squad car, they saw a black man.

When I look at you, I see your brown skin. I see you in the face of the black teenager being cuffed for no reason. I see you when I teach my history class about the murder of Emmett Till. I see you when I hear people talk about black men in a way that questions their worth and humanity.

I see you everywhere.

But that is not the first thing I see when I look at you.

When I look at you, I see my son. I see the little jellybean whose heartbeat heralded more hope than I'd ever known in motherhood. I see the continuation of the family legacy that birthed me. I see the future of a biblical legacy that began before the dawn of time. I see my beautiful, bright-eyed, firstborn son.

I see a little boy full of joy. A tall-for-his age toddler who is friendly, exuberant, and loving. You never meet a stranger. You love to snuggle, blow goodbye kisses, and flirt with any beautiful woman you see. You love to hold my hand while we're riding in the car and lift up my shirt to kiss your baby brother in my belly. Sometimes, you even wave at my bellybutton, as though he can see you. You love any song with a beat and you're addicted to *Moana*. You don't like to nap without a

bed full of stuffed animals and you refuse to go to sleep without first saying goodnight to everyone in the room—especially your mama.

Your brown skin is the same tone as mine, but wrought of a deeper hue like your daddy's. You are a replica of my baby picture with an obvious dose of Holmes thrown into your mannerisms and personality.

But because of your brown skin, you won't just be seen as tall for your age. To some, you'll look like an adult long before you're grown. Your exuberance will sometimes be mistaken for recklessness, your passion for anger. Your affection will make some people nervous, especially if your flirtation veers in the direction of the wrong white man's daughter. Your joyous dancing will indicate to some that you're wild, even threatening. Some people won't even take the time to get to know your tenderness.

Sweet boy, I do not say these things to jade you. As I teach you these lessons, I pray that they don't come from a place of bitterness or a life ruled by fear. I want them to flow from a place of wisdom. I can't just see you as my sweet little boy. I have to visualize the man that you'll become and I must prepare you to face the world in his skin.

But there is no better preparation for that than to know that you are not defined by the cruelty that some in this world wish to offer you. You aren't even completely defined by your mama's love. You are defined by the God of the universe who purposefully gave you that beautiful brown skin for his glory. No matter how the world might perceive you, hold your head high knowing that you are matchlessly loved by your Father in heaven.

And you will be fiercely protected by your mother on earth for as long as I possibly can.

Love,
Mama

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