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FOREWORD BY TONY EVANS

RAISING
SONS

OF

Promise



A GUIDE FOR SINGLE

MOTHERS OF BOYS



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I AM ISHMAEL

If you must give me a name, an identity, then call me Ishmael, for it is not important, nor does it matter who I am. I am not the focus of what I narrate. What I narrate is bigger, and more important than me.

Moby-Dick



I'm sitting on your sofa playing video games. I'm zooming Matchbox cars across your kitchen table or building with LEGO bricks on the floor. Maybe I'm playing ball in the house again, even though you've told me one hundred times not to.

I'm your son.

Okay. Obviously, I'm not really your son. But I do understand him. I bet that's why you picked up this book. You have a son, and you may feel worried because he's going to be raised without his dad.

Chances are, this isn't the way you planned it. Maybe you were married for a while until everything fell apart. Or maybe your son's father was never around—and you've been trying to navigate alone since his birth the unique world of boys. Perhaps this



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is the kind of book you never, ever planned to need or read. The mere thought of that may be aggravating.

No matter your situation, there's one thing I know for sure—your son needs you.

Boys and girls are not the same. Yes, we have many similarities, but our differences are glaring. You can try to raise your son like you were raised, but that may be frustrating for you both. Boys think, communicate, and act differently than girls do; they have different needs. For this reason, I want to offer you some insight into how boys tick so that you can parent him successfully. You're already under a lot of stress. Parenting solo is no easy feat. So I hope that by helping you decode some of what your son is processing, I can lighten that load.

I've spent decades processing my childhood, trying to reconcile what could have been from what was. You see, I was raised by a single mother. Growing up, almost all of the women I knew and loved were single mothers too. As a boy and a teenager I watched many of my aunts navigate the challenges of parenting alone. My own sister has spent much of her life parenting as a single mother, as have all of my female cousins on my mother's side. I guess you could say that married fathers were in short supply in the world in which I was raised.

Decades later I served as president of an organization called National Fatherhood Initiative and was forced to stare eyeball-to-eyeball with issues of my own father's absence. Now as president of Care Net—one of the largest networks of pregnancy centers in the United States—I work to support, and speak to, lots of single mothers. This role has motivated me to gain a better understanding of my own mother's story. Since her recent passing,

I've developed a deeper comprehension of what she endured and how that affected her mothering and me.

Through my personal observations, experience, and research, I have a deeply rooted sensitivity of this topic. I've lived it, been immersed in it, and then studied carefully how the research aligned with this world I know so well. This comprehension and appreciation for the plight of a mom parenting solo has led me to uncover three main areas where single moms can get stuck. Unless these areas are acknowledged and addressed, a mother's emotional health will struggle, and her son can suffer the consequences. Through the pages that follow we'll explore how to find hope and healing in these three main areas: loss, forgiveness, and expectations.

Together we'll explore some of the burden you may feel you have to carry as a single parent, and then we'll shift our focus to that boy who's counting on you. Maybe he's only three, splashing so much water out of the tub you're sure the bathroom will flood. Or maybe he's eleven and already spending so much time on his screens. You're worried you'll never get his attention. Or maybe he's thirteen, hanging with the wrong set of friends and pulling away. Perhaps you've tried everything and nothing disarms his defiance.

Together we'll explore what he's going through—what his world looks like, what he may be feeling, and what he needs from you. He's dealing with loss, forgiveness, and expectations too. Then, assuming you don't want him to live in your basement playing video games forever, we'll also look at healthy ways for you to help him prepare to launch and perhaps, one day, to be a good husband and a good father.

The Bible encourages us that there's nothing we'll ever go through that Jesus hasn't already endured. But I wonder if that

feels hard to believe right now. Jesus was never a single mother, you may argue. I hope to comfort you with the truth that Jesus does indeed understand your plight. And that he sees you. In fact, the Bible tells a powerful story of a single mom named Hagar and her son, a boy named Ishmael. It was almost a decade ago that I first connected to this story, and that’s what truly started my healing journey.

SON OF PROMISE

Several years ago, I wrote a book called *Bad Dads of the Bible: 8 Mistakes Every Good Dad Can Avoid*, which looked at notable men in the Bible through the lens of fatherhood. I hoped that by sharing examples from these fatherhood stories, fathers would understand that wise men learn from their mistakes but the wisest learn from the mistakes of others.

The most difficult and emotionally challenging dad I wrote about was Abraham. His “bad dad” mistake was abandoning his first son, Ishmael. We’ll dig deeper into this story in the chapters that follow, but here’s a brief preview. Abraham longed for a son for decades. God had promised he’d have many descendants. But his wife, Sarah, was biologically too old to have a child, so she gave him her servant, Hagar, who conceived a boy, Ishmael.

When Ishmael was born, there’s no doubt Abraham treated him as the son of the promise God had given him—believing that through him would come generations of blessing. Ishmael was about thirteen years old when, as God promised, Sarah conceived and bore Abraham’s true heir, Isaac. Three years later, Abraham rejected Ishmael and sent him and his mother, Hagar, into the desert with nothing but some food and water. Ishmael,

who had once known a father's love, was now an abandoned, fatherless boy. As I considered this story I was haunted by a troubling reality.

I am Ishmael.

When I was about seven years old, my mother chose to leave my father, despite having four children under the age of nine. Like Ishmael, I don't know all of the details. But it was clear my dad failed to keep some of his promises. The sacred vows he made to care for my mom and their children were broken. My whole young life changed in an instant.

I do have some memories of my father being there for me when I was very young. My dad was a lot of fun to be around. I'd describe him as the life-of-the-party type. In fact, one of my fondest memories is watching him do his James Brown imitation as my siblings and I danced with him. But the painful fact is that for much of my life, he just wasn't around.

Now, I certainly knew where my father was. He lived in my town. And on special occasions like my birthday or Christmas, he would be sure to visit, gifts in hand. But in terms of being there for me during the chaos that at times was my life, he just wasn't.¹ In fact, as I moved from boyhood to manhood, I realized that our relationship was just a veneer—like a thin layer of expensive mahogany over cheap plywood. On the surface it looked more solid than it actually was. Maybe you've had a relationship like this too.

After my dad would be away for what seemed like a long period of time to my young mind, he would suddenly come back. When he did, my siblings and I celebrated with excitement: "Dad's here! Dad's here!" we shouted with delight. He was such a lovable and easygoing guy that we could not help but soak up his

presence. Though we never knew how long it would last, we were happily swept away in Dad’s cyclone of excitement. I remember our fun times, like when Dad took me to the car racetrack or when he pulled up beside another car and revved his engine. “Race him! Race him!” I’d beg.

Looking back, I can see how this could have bothered my mom. She was left to do the hard work of parenting, while Dad reaped parenting’s rewards. Figuratively, it’s like Mom worked long hours to buy tickets to Disneyland and drove us all the way to the gate—but then Dad showed up just in time to take us in the park and have a good time. Mom put dinner on the table, worried about expenses, kept us in line with discipline. Most of what Dad did was drop in for some good times. Dad brought the party, Mom brought the chores.

Can you relate?

I don’t know the details of your situation, but if you’re reading this there’s a good chance you’re a mom who’s doing the best you can at raising your own Ishmael. Like Hagar, maybe you’ve personally experienced rejection and hurt from a man who made promises to you that he didn’t keep. Perhaps you’ve watched your little boy’s hope sink as he waited for Daddy to come home. Maybe, like my mother, you’ve witnessed his disappointment, time and again, as the man you once hoped would be your partner and his role model lets you both down. I want to acknowledge what a difficult job you have. By choosing this book it’s clear that your heart is to raise your son as best you can, regardless of the challenges you’ve faced and the obstacles that could lie ahead. Your son is blessed to have you as his mother.

Through the pages that follow, I want to ask you to be courageous. We’re going to talk frankly about some of the realities

both you and your son will face because his dad isn't around. Can I ask you to keep an open heart and mind as we dig into some tough issues? These topics may be a bit challenging at times. But, as any good doctor will tell you and as I have learned through my journey from boyhood to manhood, the source of your pain is the site of your healing. We may have to visit some hard places along the way. But because I've lived the life of an Ishmael, my hope is to give you insight and truth, coated in grace.

YOU ARE HERE

Do you enjoy shopping? Honestly, I'm not a big shopper, though my wife, Yvette, enjoys milling around antique stores and buying gardening gear. Think for a minute about the last time you visited a shopping mall that was new to you. One of the first things most of us do when we're in an unfamiliar place is search for that large sign with the map and store directory on it. Of course, the map doesn't offer a lot of help until you find one special marking—the big (and, in my experience, always red) dot that says, “You Are Here.”

No matter what chaos is happening around you, kids pulling on your purse or crowds of people trying to push on by, you know that if you're going to get what you need at that mall, you have to find the red dot. Once you find it, you can get your bearings. You can get to the sales or hit the stores you like. But until you know where you are, you can't get to where you want to go.

The same principle applies to raising your son. The preparation for parenting him well can only happen in one place, in one person—that's you.

But let me offer more encouragement. It's worth noting that the spot on that map doesn't say “You shouldn't be here” or

“How did you get here?” Finding that red “You Are Here” dot is a way to help you navigate, to find direction. It’s not a judgment. Likewise, taking pause to figure out where you are on this journey to raise a boy into a man is not about judgment; it’s about getting real so you can move forward.

For the single mom who raised me and for most single moms I know, it’s difficult to stop and find that “red dot” in their life. First of all, there’s just no time. Even if the end of the relationship has been brewing for years, when the strings are snipped it’s always sudden. Many women, like my mother, find themselves in a new situation almost overnight, as well as spiritually, emotionally, and financially unprepared.

Second, when things are tough, it’s hard to stop and dwell on where we’ve landed. It’s painful. And we can convince ourselves—or believe what culture tells us—that it’s better not to stop and reflect. In fact, as I read and observe resources intended for single mothers I notice a consistent theme. The message is not to stop and reflect; the message is to power through. Indeed, as a single mother you are encouraged to be like New York—a city that never sleeps. It’s better, they say, to just keep moving forward. Don’t look back, only forge a new future.

To a point, I agree. You can’t live in the past. After all, there is a good reason why a rearview mirror in a car is much smaller than the windshield. But the person that never sleeps, never reflects, never evaluates, never dreams, often—in the midst of the commotion—misses the still small voice of God. So too for a single mother. Indeed, to paraphrase an old philosopher, those who fail to learn from the past are destined to repeat it, and so are their children.

Raising a son from boyhood to manhood without his father is a task that has significant implications on his future, on your future, and even on the future of generations to come. It's a sort of paradox; you must help him be what he did not see. My goal is to help you raise a man who won't repeat what's been done to him. I want to help you raise a son who will long to be a faithful husband and an involved, responsible, and committed father. I want to encourage you with godly wisdom: principles and strategies to help both you and your son begin the healing process for that father wound and not repeat the mistakes of the past. Statistically, the odds are that your son will face some challenges that boys with present dads may not. Unfortunately, too many boys raised without their dads end up repeating the cycle. My goal is to help you deter your son from someday creating another father-absent home—with yet another Ishmael to be raised without a dad and another Hagar left to parent alone.

I invite you on a journey that I hope will give you a new vision for your parenting and for your son. Through this journey I hope we can move from what I call a place of *sight* to a place of *insight*. In each section you'll see this laid out clearly. There's a lot you see and know about your son already. Through these pages, I want to help show you what's beneath the surface. What is he wrestling that he can't articulate? What are you still battling that you'd rather not confront? There's no pressure to have it all together. I just want us to be real so we can find the One who'll heal.

As you may know, there is a good reason why flight attendants remind us before every airplane takeoff that if the cabin pressure changes, put on your oxygen mask first. You can't keep your

vulnerable son healthy and protected if you're passed out. Therefore, some of what we'll focus on is how you can keep breathing. As we examine in more detail the plight of Hagar, you'll see that even in her abandonment, God saw and cared for her and her son. He did not leave her to do the difficult alone.

Neither has he left you.

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