

# LONG- DISTANCE *Grandparenting*

Nurturing the Faith of Your Grandchildren  
When You Can't Be There in Person



**WAYNE RICE**

DR. JOSH MULVIHILL, GENERAL EDITOR



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## SERIES PREFACE

GRANDPARENTING MATTERS is a series of short books that address common grandparenting problems with biblical solutions and practical ideas. I have the joy of talking with grandparents all over the country about their God-designed role in the lives of children and grandchildren. Regularly, questions arise about how to do what the Bible says in the midst of barriers, problems, and challenges.

Grandparenting is filled with many joys, but it is also filled with unexpected pain and problems. Relational tensions, grandparenting restrictions, adult prodigals, grandparents as parents, divorce, long-distance relationships, and blended families all can cause the heart to ache. When brokenness touches our family, we naturally ask questions about how to navigate the challenges.

There are a growing number of resources for Christian grandparents that address the purpose of grandparenting, but few resources deal with the problem-solving side of family life. We created this series because problems are common, hope is needed, and God's Word provides guidance that can be applied to our unique situations. This series aims to simultaneously comfort

and encourage, to equip and edify, as well as to point the way ahead. If you are discouraged or hurting, then I trust you will be blessed by this series. If you are looking for biblical solutions and practical how-tos, you will find them in these pages.

We've titled the series GRANDPARENTING MATTERS because we believe the Bible teaches that the grandparent-grandchild relationship is important and worthy of our time and attention. Grandparents have a significant impact on the spiritual lives of grandchildren second only to that of parents. Our prayer is that the Gospel is proclaimed, God is honored, your family experiences healing and health, and your children and children's children know, love, and serve Jesus.

I'm delighted by the high caliber of authors in this series and the impact these books will have on families for their good and for the glory of God. It has been a tremendous privilege to be partners in God's grace with these fine authors. I trust you will be blessed by their godly wisdom, gain a renewed hope in God, experience joy in Christ despite trying circumstances, and be better equipped to be a disciple-making grandparent who passes on a heritage of faith to future generations.

Josh Mulvihill  
Founding Member, the Legacy Coalition  
Executive Director of Church  
and Family Ministry, Renewation  
Connect with me at [GospelShapedFamily.com](http://GospelShapedFamily.com).

# INTRODUCTION

*I think we can all agree that one of the great joys of growing older is becoming a grandparent!*

And sadly, one of the great heartbreaks of grandparenting is when you are separated from your grandchildren for lengthy periods.

They live in another town or another state or even another country. Maybe their mom and dad had to move because of a job opportunity or a military deployment. Or it could have been other family issues (perhaps they moved to be closer to the in-laws), or they had to find more affordable housing, or better weather, or better schools, or better doctors.

Or maybe it was you who had to relocate and suddenly you found yourself many miles away from your children and grandchildren. That can happen too—sometimes by choice, and other times out of necessity.

Obviously there are plenty of good (and not so good) reasons why we become long-distance grandparents. In today's mobile society, it's very easy these days, and rather likely, for families to move several times during their working years and to move

great distances as well. I'll tell you a little bit about my own family's story shortly.

In recent years I have been working closely with the Legacy Coalition—a ministry to and for grandparents—and I have come to appreciate greatly that the biblical role of a grandparent is much more than just being a playmate or baby-sitter. I love to take our grandkids fishing or go on hikes or play games with them, but I now have come to realize that grandparents also have a holy calling and responsibility to pass on a legacy of faith to their grandchildren. More on this later, but suffice it to say that this realization has been a game changer for me.

So, I've found that becoming a long-distance grandparent can make you not only sad but it can be rather challenging as well. How can you be a spiritual influence on your grandchildren when you rarely ever see them? That's the reason for this book.

## **The Distance Dilemma**

Here's what I've learned so far about long-distance grandparenting.

Simply put, you can choose one of three ways to respond to distance.

1. Distance can become an *excuse* for not doing anything. It's easy to just throw up our hands and say that because we live far away from our grandchildren, there's nothing we can do. We are now exempt from our responsibility to influence our grandchildren for Christ. We're off the hook, so to speak. Sadly, many grandparents take this approach.
2. Distance can be seen as an *obstacle*. We have good intentions but let the distance prevent us from doing anything.

It's just too big an obstacle to overcome. We let it stand in the way of being the kind of spiritual influence on our grandchildren that God wants us to be.

3. Or, distance can be an *opportunity*. I have learned that it is possible for grandparents who live far away from their grandchildren to actually have a better relationship with their grandchildren than those who live close by. Some grandparents take proximity to their grandchildren for granted! Long-distance grandparents, on the other hand, *have* to be intentional about connecting with grandchildren, and doing so with regularity.

Distance does not have to be an excuse or an obstacle to good grandparenting. I know from experience that long-distance grandparents can make a deep and lasting impression that goes on for generations. And they provide a special kind of love that no one else can duplicate. It would be nice if all grandparents could live within walking distance of all their grandchildren and have easy access to them, but in today's world, that is rarely the case. Therefore, we should try to be the most intentional, loving, and effective grandparents that we can possibly be.

### **Ideas, Ideas!**

I've tried to make this book as practical as possible, so it contains a lot of ideas that I have collected from other grandparents. Here are three bits of advice concerning them:

1. Don't try them all. If you do, your grandkids will think you've gone crazy.
2. Don't let any of these ideas make you feel guilty about everything you are not doing. Remember that in most cases, *something is always better than nothing*. None of

us were perfect parents and we're not going to be perfect grandparents either. But we can all probably do a little better than we're doing right now. So choose something you can do rather than feel bad about all you're not doing.

3. If an idea sounds good but doesn't quite fit your situation, change it. No idea is very good right out of the box. As you read through these ideas, think how you might be able to adapt them to fit your family, your personality, or your grandkids. Hopefully, these suggestions can help you think of other great ideas that aren't in this book.

## Thanks

Thanks, Josh Mulvihill, for asking me to write this book as part of a series of grandparenting books for Bethany House and the Legacy Coalition. The whole process of gathering ideas and thinking deeply about this subject has been very motivating for me. I have realized how much I love my grandchildren, and there's nothing more I would like for them to know than that God loves them too—even more than Grandpa does.

Thank you to Deborah Haddix, an experienced grandma and author who generously sent me a batch of great ideas, many of which are included throughout this book. Thanks also to my cousin Justin Rice, who has been a great encouragement to me and a wonderful example of what good grandparenting looks like.

Thanks to Larry Fowler and the entire Legacy Coalition team for giving me the opportunity to serve in this very important ministry to grandparents. As my old friend John Coulombe likes to say, "If things are going to get better in this country, it's not about changing what happens in the White House; it's about changing what happens in *our* house." Amen, brother.

## On Becoming a Long-Distance Grandparent

My grandparents were long-distance grandparents.

As a child, I probably thought that *all* grandparents lived far away simply because that was my experience. In reality, long-distance grandparenting is a relatively recent development. While researchers tell us that more than half of all grandparents today have grandchildren who live more than 200 miles away from them, this has not always been the case.<sup>1</sup> Before World War II, the typical American household<sup>2</sup> included one or more grandparents living under the same roof as their children and grandchildren. It was more typical for grandparents of a few generations ago to be close to their grandkids than to be far away.

But that was not the case for me.

I was born on the front edge of the baby boom. Immediately after World War II, my newly-discharged-from-the-navy father made the decision to move his young family from Tennessee, where I was born, to California, where I have lived ever since. His decision to move west was primarily an economic one, and it paid off handsomely as my father became a successful

building contractor in fledgling Ventura County, just north of the city of Los Angeles.

Because we lived so far out west, I rarely ever saw my grandparents. We did, however, make the pilgrimage each summer from California to Tennessee to visit the “kinfolk”—including my grandparents. I have (mostly) fond memories of those three- and four-day drives in the desert heat across the U.S. on two-lane highway Route 66, sandwiched in the backseat of our Oldsmobile between my two brothers, without air conditioning or entertainment of any kind save the occasional string of Burma Shave signs that would appear along the highway or a stop at a genuine Indian Trading Post. As a child, the word *vacation* was pretty much synonymous with visiting relatives—much more so than going to amusement parks or camping trips.

I’m thankful that my parents made those treks across the country a priority during my childhood years. For that reason, my grandparents were not completely unknown to me, and while they didn’t have the opportunity to spend a lot of time with me, I learned much from them during those visits, especially about my heritage as a Christian.

For example, I have vivid memories of our visits to the home of my great-grandparents, “Pappy” and “Mammy” Nesbitt. These were my mother’s grandparents who lived in the “country.” I put the word *country* in quotation marks because “country” people in Tennessee were true hillbillies who were different from people who lived in the city. They had no modern conveniences except for maybe a telephone and a radio. They lived off the land, gathered eggs from the henhouse, milked the cows, plowed the fields (with mules rather than tractors), and generally worked hard their entire lives. Life expectancy was not long, so I was quite fortunate that my Pappy and Mammy Nesbitt were still alive.

Of course, a visit to the country was a real adventure for a California boy like me. First, in order to get to Pappy Nesbitt’s

house (which was actually a cabin), we had to drive down several miles of dirt roads until we reached the “holler” where they lived. Then we hiked down a path that led to the creek and the swinging bridge that crossed it and led to their home. The bridge was made of poles on each side of the creek, thick ropes, and wooden slats, handmade, no doubt, by Pappy himself. It would sway back and forth as we crossed over to the other side. I loved playing on that bridge.

This was also my first experience using a “privy” (or outhouse). Of course, country people did not have indoor plumbing. They had a water well behind the cabin from which they drew water up in buckets for cooking, baths, washing clothes, etc. All this was fascinating to me. The world I lived in was nothing like this one.

Perhaps my most indelible memory of my great-grandparents, however, was listening to them sing and pray. Whenever we would visit, they always took time to sing and pray with us. It was not like the singing and praying I was used to. They came from a holiness church background, which apparently assumed that God was hard of hearing because they prayed and sang as loud as they could. They would also “get happy” with shouts of joy and often tears. As a child it was a little bit scary for me, but it also made a big impression.

So much so that my brother Jim wrote a country song based on our experiences visiting our Nesbitt grandparents. If you’d like to hear the music, search iTunes or YouTube for “Swingin’ Bridge” by the group Brush Arbor.

1. I was just a young boy, playing on that swingin’ bridge  
Out at Granpappy Nesbitt’s house through the creek and  
over the ridge  
Laughin’ out loud on that old bridge, us kids could make  
it swing  
And we could hear comin’ from the house the old folks as  
they’d sing

CHORUS:

Swingin' bridge

Memories of how we used to pray

Somehow deep inside my soul, all I am and all I know

Traces back to the days of that swingin' bridge.

2. Throwin' rocks to the water below I could hear Amazing Grace

And I can picture Granpappy sing as the tears rolled down his face

He'd call us kids together knowing that we'd rather play

But there's no way he'd let us leave without some time to pray . . .

3. All us kids are married now with children of our own  
And each of us made the good Lord the foundation of our home

And in my mind I often drive through the creek and over the ridge

To play and sing Amazing Grace, on that old swingin' bridge.<sup>3</sup>

Here's the point: Long-distance grandparents can still have a powerful impact on their grandchildren even when they don't see them all that often. I only saw my grandparents once a year (at best), but I will never forget them and I will always be grateful for their love and faithfulness to Christ, which is now being replicated in the lives of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren and beyond. This will always be a comfort to me because I am now a long-distance grandparent myself.

### **When the Grandchildren Move Away**

My wife, Marci, and I couldn't hold back the tears when the last of our three children and their families moved away from

San Diego and our “home place” where they grew up and where we still live. Our son Nathan and his family (including our two oldest grandchildren) have never lived close to us, but for many years they were only a two-hour drive away. Now they live in Seattle, Washington, more than 1,200 miles away, where Nate is a youth pastor and family counselor. Our daughter, Amber, just this year joined her brother in Seattle, where she found employment as a marriage and family therapist, and she took her son Jack (our next-oldest grandchild) with her of course. Our son Corey, along with his wife and our two youngest grandchildren, also moved away just a few months before Amber did, although not quite so far away. They currently live in Hollister, California, which is about 450 miles from San Diego. We can make that drive in about seven hours and have done so several times already. All three of our children moved to these distant locations for reasons of employment, which was necessary and completely understandable even though it hurt deeply to see them go. This has resulted in a big change for us. Our home was for so many years a hubbub of activity for our whole family. For a while, our daughter and grandson Jack lived with us during a transition time in her life (she is a single mom).

Now my wife and I are alone, and while we know it wasn't intentional on the part of our kids, we sometimes feel a bit abandoned. I use that term jokingly of course—our kids didn't deliberately try to get away from us (at least we hope not). Still, we miss them all greatly and sometimes feel envious of grandparents we know who have easy access to their grandchildren all year long.

### ***Responding Appropriately***

As I mentioned, Marci and I had quite a few mixed emotions when the last of our children (and grandchildren) moved away from us. We were very sad because we were losing them,

but at the same time we were happy that they were able to live their own lives and had some good opportunities awaiting them elsewhere. We also experienced dread, disappointment, anxiety—even a little anger at times. Why did they have to leave us now? Couldn't they have waited a few more years? Was this really necessary?

Feelings of loss and sadness are to be expected, that's true. But one thing we've learned is that we don't want to let our feelings ruin the relationships we have with our kids and grandkids. We don't want how we feel to become a heavy burden for them to bear. Some grandparents go out of their way to remind their children constantly that they are sad and lonely. Maybe that's why the kids moved away in the first place—they just got tired of being around someone who complains or criticizes them all the time. If you keep a scorecard on how many times they visit or call, you can be sure that you will get fewer visits and calls. Scorekeeping only puts pressure on the relationship, which is completely counterproductive.

If you want your children and grandchildren to reach out to you more often, be the most positive, encouraging, grace-filled parent and grandparent you can be. It's okay to be honest with your kids and grandkids from time to time, but don't make your own misery the main topic of conversation every time they call or they will definitely stop calling. Instead, learn to forgive, focus on the positive, and enjoy your family every time you have the opportunity. Ask questions and focus on their feelings more than your own and you will definitely get a lot more calls and visits.

### **When Grandparents Do the Leaving**

Besides employment or deployment, our children and grandchildren can move away for any number of personal or professional reasons. But sometimes it's not the children who do

the leaving—it's us! Nowadays it's becoming more and more common for retirees to pick up and move off to a distant place where the weather is better, the cost of living is lower, and the golf courses are plentiful. The “retirement lifestyle” has now become a big part of the American Dream—that golden age when you can finally stop working and begin ticking items off your bucket list. Or, you can move to a nice adults-only community where you can pursue the life of leisure you've always wanted.

It all sounds wonderful—and for many people it is—but now it's the children and grandchildren who are likely to feel abandoned. Just when the grandkids need the wisdom and influence that only a grandparent can bring, Grandpa and Grandma have flown the coop. They've either sequestered themselves in Florida where they are living the good life, or they are sunning themselves on the deck of a cruise ship in the Caribbean.

Due to the aging of the baby boomer generation, the fifty-five and older gated community has become the fastest-growing housing trend in America today. Some of these communities, such as The Villages<sup>4</sup> in Florida, don't allow anyone under nineteen to live there and restrict visits by children to a maximum of thirty days a year. Not all of these communities are quite so restrictive, but they all pitch “the good life” as one of leisure rather than one of legacy and responsibility.

The only hope we have that our children and grandchildren will have faith is for us to pass it on to them without regard for our own comfort and convenience. How can we impart our knowledge and our experience with God to them when we have isolated ourselves in a gated community in a galaxy far away?

I know that circumstances as well as proper stewardship of time and resources often require us to make changes in where and how we live after retirement. My wife and I recently downsized to a smaller home in our area after more than forty years in the same house. We had to sell the old home place, which was

a difficult thing to do because that was where we had raised our children and hosted so many gatherings of friends and family over the years. We said goodbye to a place with so many good memories, but we now have something we can afford on our much smaller income. But it's not a community for seniors only. Our next-door neighbors have children, and we do have a spare bedroom where the grandchildren can stay for as long as they want.

### ***The Bucket-List Retirement***

And then there's the bucket list. It was popularized in the 2007 movie about two terminally ill men (played by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman) who meet in the hospital and set out on a quest to complete their combined bucket list, which includes visiting Stonehenge and getting a tattoo. The movie was intended to be a comedy—and it does have its very funny moments—but the concept has been taken quite seriously by a lot of retirees (and grandparents), who are unabashedly “spending their children's inheritance” by doing all the things they were unable to do when they were younger.

Psychiatrist Marc Agronin, in an article he wrote for the *Wall Street Journal*, states, “For many seniors, the bucket list has become the ultimate celebration of aging.” He describes how today's generation of retirees (who have more money than ever before) are spending their golden years chasing once-in-a-lifetime adventures like sky diving from 13,000 feet, hiking the Great Wall of China, swimming with sharks, or skiing the Andes. For them, it's the chance to do things they put off for years while working and caring for family, and to make the most of the time they have remaining. “What's not to love about a life of dream vacations and big thrills?” he asks.

“Unfortunately, quite a lot,” responds Dr. Agronin, answering his own question. He explains how he, as a therapist, has

had conversations with numerous seniors who say that rather than feeling exhilarated by a life of bucket-list adventures, they often end up feeling depressed and disconnected. He recommends that seniors stay home and do something meaningful and productive with their lives instead, or take their grandchildren with them on their bucket-list adventures so they can spend some quality time with them or teach them something new.<sup>5</sup>

Gated retirement communities and bucket list adventures are marketed heavily these days to aging baby boomers who haven't given much thought to their roles and responsibilities as grandparents and the consequences of taking extended time away from their grandkids. As I mentioned earlier, there are many good reasons why we become long-distance grandparents and some of them are completely out of our control. But when we do have the choice and opportunity to avoid putting distance between ourselves and our grandchildren, we are wise to do all we can to stay close by and connected.

### **Distance Isn't Always Measured in Miles**

You don't have to be hundreds of miles away from your grandchildren to be a long-distance grandparent, of course. If you live in Los Angeles for example, it might take an hour to go visit your grandchildren even though they live in the same city. And even if you don't have traffic issues, it's possible for people to live very near, even on the same street, and never have any contact with each other. I have a friend who lives very close to me whom I never see except once a year at a conference we both attend some 2,000 miles away. We always laugh when we see each other because it seems crazy that we don't connect more often at home. Just because you live close to someone doesn't mean that you will be spending a lot of time with them. I'm

embarrassed to admit that even when our grandchildren lived close to us, we sometimes went weeks without seeing them. We had to make a real effort to go visit or to invite them to our home.

There are lots of reasons for why and how we become long-distance grandparents—some good, some not so good—but if we understand the role of a grandparent from a biblical perspective, distance doesn't have to be a barrier to good grandparenting. It is to the biblical role of a grandparent that we now turn.

### **For Further Reflection and Action**

1. Did you have long-distance grandparents? How did they influence you?
2. How does being a long-distance grandparent make you feel?
3. How do you plan to spend your retirement years?
4. Do you have a bucket list? What's on it?
5. Try creating a bucket list of things you want to do with each of your grandchildren during the next five years. Start checking those items off your list as soon as you can!