



FOREWORD BY EMILY LEY

# GIVING YOUR WORDS

*The* LIFEGIVING POWER

*of a* VERBAL HOME

*for* FAMILY FAITH FORMATION

SALLY AND CLAY CLARKSON

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*of a* VERBAL HOME  
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SALLY AND CLAY CLARKSON



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# *Foreword*

Of the many lessons I've learned from Sally and Clay Clarkson over the years, the single most poignant bit of wisdom I've gleaned is this: in a world wrought with worry, aching for Truth, and full of so many things we cannot control, the place where we can make the biggest impact for good is within the four walls of our homes.

What a beautiful, grace-filled concept for a busy, often overwhelmed, perfectionist mama to hear—even and especially as it sits contrary to what our busy, fast-paced world is telling us. There is often so much to do outside our homes that we forget the power we have within them. Home matters on a deeply spiritual and powerful level. It is there that bellies are nourished, spirits are soothed, and hearts are shaped. Home is where we are welcomed with a hug, a warm meal, a place on the sofa, and a listening ear. Home is where we can be truly known, where we can stop pretending and take off the cloaks of whoever we are trying to be outside those walls. Home is a sacred, special, spiritual place.

*Giving Your Words* digs even deeper into this concept, exploring the power of our words: of stories, questions, truth, encouragement, and so much more. In the pages of this book, we are reminded that while grand achievements and mountains moved are wonderful, it is imperative to turn our eyes toward that which may seem so simple, but is so important: our time spent in conversation with our children.

As a mom to three spunky, spirited children, I have seen the beauty that happens when we make space for bedtime conversations, little hearts pouring out worries as they drift off to sleep. I've experienced the power of a question passed around the dinner table over bowls of spaghetti: "What interests you and makes you curious these days?" Answers pouring out from Triceratops to tea parties to Toni Morrison, hearts ablaze. I've held sweaty pre-teen hands and listened as tender prayers are offered, God's ear bent toward us. From fairy tales to future plans, words have shaped who my own beautiful children are becoming. And it's my hope and prayer that they will take our words with them one day as they leave the nest.

All of Sally and Clay's work, but especially this fantastic book, invites us to slow down, turn our eyes and hearts to God, and pay attention to the power our words have. I often think of the words we share with our children, at any age, as little nuggets of wisdom they carry with them in their proverbial pockets. These words—reminders of their worth, of God's love for them, of our love for them, of what's most important in life—are with them wherever they go, through great experiences and hard ones. They're with them as they make decisions, as they experience hurt, and as they make sense of the world around them. What a beautiful thing to have to carry through the world with you.

*Foreword*

To Sally and Clay, thank you for sharing your hearts and experiences with me and so many others. *Giving Your Words* is a treasure of a book that will shape the lives and homes of so many families over the coming years. To the mothers and fathers who have picked up this book: you are doing a good job; keep seeking Truth and keep pouring it out.

*With love,*  
Emily Ley

# *Preface*

SALLY CLARKSON

My mother was not deeply theological, but her simple trust in God was personal and real. I still remember one special Christmas when I was about nine years old. She and I were sitting on the couch by our towering Christmas tree aglow with white lights and colorful, shiny baubles adorning every branch. Sipping our hot chocolates, we sat shoulder to shoulder, taking in the magical moment together.

Out of the blue, she nudged me, looked very solemnly into my eyes, and said, “One thing is important for you to remember the rest of your life.”

I sat up straighter, sensing this was a profound moment to her. She said very clearly, “These words have carried me my whole life: ‘If God is for you, who can be against you?’ Just remember that God is for you, and you will always be able to know there is no circumstance or person who is bigger than Him or stronger than Him. Say it with me: ‘If God is for me, who can be against me?’”

And so I did.

Then we sat quietly, enjoying the beauty together. But since that time so many years ago, I have believed that God is on my side. That He is for me. Even as I can see my seventieth year just ahead, those simple words by the apostle Paul (see Romans 8:31)—God’s words—have carried me through many life challenges, and will continue to do so.

My mother gave me her words, and they have stayed with me my whole life.

Words are like food to our hearts, minds, and souls. They have the potential to shape destinies, inspire courage, and instill character. Words can express assurance of love, shape our emotional health, and lay foundations of truth that hold us fast our whole lives. Words have the power to pass on a legacy of faith.

Jesus himself was called the Word, or the Message. He was God’s Message incarnate, the exact representation of His divine nature. Jesus spoke words of divine truth, and His life affirmed the integrity of His words as He lived them out faithfully. Christ became for us a model of what we wanted to do in giving and living our own messages with our children.

Recently, Clay and I were sitting on our back deck with the sun setting over the Colorado Rocky Mountains and the fire pit dancing with flames as we sipped cool drinks. It was a perfect moment to revisit the landscape of our forty-one years of marriage and thirty-eight years of parenting our four children, now all adults.

As we pondered and remembered together, it was the words that stood out to us. We had spent our lives giving our words to our children, the words of Christ, Scripture, and godly wisdom. We invested in them words that would shape their own life stories. Just as my mother’s words had for me, we hoped our words would be a lasting legacy to

faithfully carry our children into the darkness of this secular world with their own messages of light.

During the weeks when Clay was giving this book life and poignancy, I was bundled up in an overstuffed chair recovering from hip replacement surgery. Many evenings, we sat together and talked about the messages that we had given to our children, the mornings of devotions when we spoke of God's truth, the family discussions while traveling in the car, and the many daily teachable moments in our home. We recalled all our days of life together as we had shaped our children's sense of virtue and character, given bedtime blessings of peace to their hearts, and shared secret bedroom talks that assured them of our love.

Looking back, it was like a symphony, with our voices as instruments playing notes in all the different ways that we gave our words. The music we gave would become a whole life legacy, given from our hearts to theirs, that they would carry throughout their lives. The music of our lives and words would be continued in the world through them.

Giving words, shaping life messages, building a legacy of unconditional love and wisdom into the hearts, minds, and souls of our children—that all required intentionality, lots of purposeful moments, and a lifetime of speaking life. As parents, we are stewards of the grace of God to the precious ones He has entrusted into our hands.

We offer this book to you as a picture of what is possible in forming faith, hope, and love in the children God has placed in your homes. It will happen as you give them your words. And remember, as you seek to offer your words, that God is for you. He is for you, and with you, as you leave a legacy of faith in your children by giving your words.

# *Introduction*

## THE WORDS OF OUR LIVES

It was a generational keeper of a photograph. Every Christmas morning for thirty-something years we had come to The Broadmoor hotel for breakfast and a post-repast session of family photo taking. Winter had not always been so agreeable in Colorado Springs, but December 25, 2018, offered a stunningly beautiful morning of blue sky, bright sun, and crisp air. It was the Christmas of our thirty-eighth year of marriage, appropriately one full generation in the Bible. Our children were grown and living all over the world, and we knew this might be the last time we would all be able to gather this way. The night before, on Christmas Eve, we had enjoyed our traditional Shepherds' Meal of potato soup, fresh herb bread loaf, cheeses, nuts, and fruits, followed by Clay's reading of the nativity story. Christmas morning we had risen early, enjoyed hot chocolate, opened our stockings (a favorite Christmas morning tradition), and then headed off to The Broadmoor for a leisurely breakfast.

After a walk around the lake and some candid photos, it was time for the traditional Christmas family photo. We decided to try a new setting, collecting ourselves around a lakeside bench as Nathan posed us—Mom and Dad sitting, kids standing behind us—and Joel set the timer on his iPhone. He hurried back to the bench bunch for the digital countdown, and a moment of memory was captured in a surprisingly good Clarkson family photo. But what was not captured in that Christmas Day image was what has really always defined the Clarkson family—not the visual, but the verbal; not the images, but the words. Truth be told, we probably all wished there was a camera that could take verbalgraphs, capturing all the words of so many spoken moments in our lives. During those ten days together at the family home in Monument, whenever we were all together, it was altogether verbal—in the car, at breakfast in the den, at tea times on the deck, in the evening on the front porch, on long walks, at dinner around the table. Wherever we were, there were words.

As that Christmas Day came to a close, we were all on the backyard deck in a circle of chairs around the new fire pit. With zipped-up winter jackets, lap blankets, hot drinks, and the fire pit flame set to high, we sloughed off the encroaching cool of night as the sun slipped behind the mountains. Another family conversation needed to run its course before we would seek warmth inside. All the kids were sharing memories of growing up in the always verbal and word-driven atmosphere of our home. Listening to them talk, it was clear to us as parents that words had not just filled their lives but formed them, shaping our children into the word-loving adults they had become and were becoming.

They fondly remembered the countless dinner table discussions throughout their childhoods and teens. They recalled Sarah’s amazing ability to read and remember books, Joel’s penchant for long and insightful explanations of theology, Nathan’s challenging questions and opinions about life, and Joy’s insistence as the youngest on being heard in family discussions. They talked about a life of reading, and how books and stories had formed their growing minds. They talked about poems and speeches memorized and recited, *Our 24 Family Ways*, birthday breakfasts, prayers and readings, and annual family day mornings of remembering. As the sun set, the cold rose, and the conversation drew to a close, there was a brief “look at us now” moment. They had all become people of words—authors of books, writers of screenplays, crafters of poems, builders of blogs and podcasts, speakers and debaters, performers and actors, post-grad students of imagination, theology, and literature. Finally, the words of that moment slowed to a stop. Everyone knew instinctively it was time to go inside and sit down to a warm meal around one more table of good food and, yes, good words.

Later that night, after we thawed out and our grown-up children had all gone to their respective rooms, we reminisced briefly about our own experience as parents with the words that had so formed our lives as a family. We’ve been talking about parenting, and talking as parents, for over half our lives. Very early in our marriage, well before children gave us so much more to talk about, we would stay up late thinking out loud together about what kinds of parents we would be, what our home life would be like, and what our children might become. We plotted and prayed about what kind of life to give to them, but as young and intuitive Christian

idealists, it was the spiritual kind of life, not “the good life” of things and experiences, that most occupied our minds. And that would mean giving them our words.

### Then and Now

That was then, of course, when we realized how much our parenting would be about words; and this is now, forty years later, when all those given words have come alive and are incarnated in the world in our four children. They’re all grown up now, and still growing with God, and we thank the Lord that our words (or most of them, anyway) have worked—they’ve worked *into* our children’s lives to shape their minds and souls; worked *for* them to give them faith and wisdom for life; and worked *through* them as they are making their ways and their own marks in the world for God. It all started in the verbal atmosphere of our home, but those words worked only because we intentionally gave them to our children.

Of course, all our words and ideals also became seeds that took root and, in 1994, became Whole Heart Ministries, a family effort to offer biblical help and hope to Christian parents. Since then, in addition to talking *about* and *as* parents, we’ve also been talking *to* parents in workshops, events, small groups, books, blogs, and podcasts. And now, as we enter the backstretch of that ministry, we’re still looking ahead, but we’re also gleaning from the past. The simple truths about words that we share in this book are much clearer to us now than they ever could have been in our early days of hazy, idealistic vision-casting as not-yet parents. Many times, parents at our events would take us aside and ask us quietly

with a serious frown, “What is the most important thing I can do so my children will follow God?” Somewhere along the way, we realized that the answer to those “What’s your secret?” questions was not in any of our clever, compelling, or convicting messages, but was much simpler. It was, in a word, “Words!”

We are all reminded, every day, that we still live in the Information Age that dawned mid-twentieth century with the computer. Cloud-based computing, digital connections, and ubiquitous screens ensure its continued exponential growth. For parents, that reality has translated into an endless electronic stream of how-tos, what-to-dos, and best parental practices. We live with the constant drumbeat of temptation to pick a voice out of all the noise and just parent by someone else’s formula. And yet, we also know we are called by Scripture to parent by the power of the Holy Spirit, and there is no formula for that; it is a life of faith. Parenting with faith requires a bigger picture of a Christian home, not just as a place to impart information, but to cultivate faith formation and even personal transformation. Without that, anything we say will rarely rise to being the faith-formed and faith-forming gift that God intended words to be. Which brings us back to that word.

When we looked back to find the answer to the question that parents had asked us, we discovered one constant factor that stood out across all the years of parenting that happened in our home. At every point along the way, we had cultivated by faith what we describe now as a “verbal home.” We filled the atmosphere of our home life with words, and our children breathed them in. We were intentional to ensure that we gave words to our children that would fill their spiritual lungs

with the lifegiving air of the “grace and truth” of Jesus and the Spirit and word of God. It wasn’t really a “secret” of our parenting, but we’re confident now that it—the words—was the single most important factor in our parenting.

This book is about how to create a verbal home. After all our messages, media, and books about Christian parenting in over three decades of ministry, it seems fitting that this book can be like an exclamation mark at the end of a long sentence. Because here’s the reality we’re realizing: Without the verbal factor, even the best and most Christian parenting advice and wisdom we suggest will be like using low-octane gasoline for a high-octane engine. Giving your faith-formed words to your children is filling their tanks with the best fuel you can give them for running the race that God sets before them. This book is not about us putting words in your mouth, but about you putting words in your children. It’s about you, by an act of faith, giving them your words and God’s words.

Let us be clear, though, how *Giving Your Words* can help you learn the art of creating a verbal home. We did not set out to write a comprehensive exploration and explanation of the verbal task in parenting. Rather, we mean for *Giving Your Words* to be more like a primer—a starting place to find some simple suggestions, tools, and tips to help you become a verbal parent who is “at home with words.” It is a framework to build on, not a formula to follow. We cannot tell you all the words you’ll need to give to your children, or all the ways that you can give them those words. Our goal is more focused: to convince you of the lifegiving power of a verbal home. What comes next will be up to you.

It might be helpful, then, to know what *Giving Your Words* is *not* about, and then explain what it *is* about. First,

although we discuss biblical and practical theological insights, this book is not a theology of words. Also, though we may skim the surface of language studies, this book is not about linguistics. Finally, though we exposit numerous biblical terms and scriptures to learn what God’s word says about words, this book is not a Bible study.

Here is what *Giving Your Words* is about. First, this book is about a charge to Christian parents emerging out of our own parenting experience, biblical convictions, and family ministry. We want to light a fire in your heart to give words in your home the priority God intends for them. Second, this book is about encouraging you to *be* a disciple so you can *make* disciples of your children. Paul’s words to the Romans about the gospel are no less true when applied in your home to your children: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (10:17). It is by the words you give to your children—that they hear from you—that they will find faith and become Christ’s disciples. Finally, this book is about casting a big-picture vision for the Christian home. It is about understanding the formative influence of a verbal home on the faith, intellect, and imaginations of your children.

### Starting the Journey to a Verbal Home

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” That pithy quote about learning is typically, and incorrectly, attributed to nineteenth-century Irish poet W. B. Yeats. The misattributed aphorism is certainly memorable, but the original saying from which it was drawn is more likely from first-century Greek philosopher Plutarch: “For

the mind does not require filling like a bottle, but rather, like wood, it only requires kindling to create in it an impulse to think independently and an ardent desire for the truth.”<sup>1</sup>

Here is Plutarch’s point. The mind is not like a bottle, a neutral container that requires only filling up with words to make it useful. Rather, the mind is more like wood, a solid source of stored potential energy ready to be ignited and released. When kindling is lit beneath a log, those smaller fires become a catalyst that sets the larger piece of wood aflame. That burning mind is what Plutarch describes as the “impulse to think independently” and the “ardent desire for the truth.” Though we didn’t usually quote Greek philosophy to each other, those were qualities we wanted for our children, and we believed that words would be the kindling to ignite their minds to think and to seek truth. The mind Plutarch described, though, is not the “empty slate” (*tabula rasa*) of Aristotle, but is rather already prepared and ready to respond. It is the same divinely designed “mind” assumed and taught in Scripture—a spiritual faculty of our being that is fueled by words to become fuel for words.

In some ways, this book is like a conversation about the meaning of Plutarch’s words, spoken around the same time that Christianity was spreading through the Mediterranean world and beyond. The Gospel authors were recording the words and story of Jesus, the apostle Paul was teaching about the Christian mind, and the other inspired writers were giving shape to the language and truths of Christianity. Their flame-kindled words, starting from a tiny movement in a troubled country and time, would fuel the growth of Christianity like a wildfire, burning its truths into every facet of world history for the next two thousand years, and fueling

the growth of Christianity into the largest religion in the history of the world. Words can change the world.

As for the words of this book, we view them not just as information to impart, but as a conversation to start. We want to engage your mind with *our* words so you will engage the minds of your children with *your* words. Perhaps you have seen the 1987 anti-drug television commercial that featured a human brain next to overcooked fried eggs: “This is your brain. . . . This is your brain on drugs.”<sup>2</sup> We want to change that image, replacing the fried eggs with a roaring campfire, and say, “This is your mind. This is your mind on words.” Words will light and fuel those kinds of fires in the minds of your children.

Here’s the simple path we’ll follow in *Giving Your Words* to explore how to create a verbal home. Chapter 1 will consider what Scripture says about words. Chapters 2 and 3 (“Living Words”) will consider the kinds of words to give, and how you can give them more effectively. Chapters 4 through 9 (“Giving Words”) will focus on six specific kinds of words to give. Chapter 10 (“Lifegiving Words”) will focus on the call to a verbal home. The epilogue is words from each of our children, and “Our 24 Family Words of Life” is a resource to put *Giving Your Words* into practice.

We all nod and agree with the familiar adage “A picture is worth a thousand words.” But we’d like to suggest that an exponential inverse of that truth is even more powerful: “A word is worth ten thousand pictures.” Picture what words can do in the hearts, minds, and souls of your children, and then show them by giving them your words.

## ONE

# In the Beginning Was the Words

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with  
God, and the Word was God.*

*John 1:1*

The pre-digital-era photograph still stirs delightful memories—smiling young mother holding her bundled newborn on a sunny day in May, ascending the front porch stairs into our little girl’s new home. It was our second house in Colorado, a needed upgrade from the small and drafty split-level with brown siding and a brown backyard, where we started our marriage. This one was better suited to starting our family—a cozy two-story blue Cape Cod, with cared-for landscaping and a greenbelt walking path just beyond our grassy backyard. Even baby Sarah, just home from the

hospital, would surely smile if she knew the outdoor joys that awaited her.

The following spring was full of the blue skies and temperate weather that Colorado brags about. By then we had a small sandbox in the backyard, close to the picket fence shared with our next-door neighbor. One-year-old Sarah delighted to be outside in her favorite sunny and sandy spot, where she could play and squeal, gesturing excitedly at Buffy, the neighbors' friendly cocker spaniel. It was, of course, also a time when we regularly played the "Mama" and "Papa" name game with her, each of us trying to elicit her first word. So far, though, the only thing elicited was the familiar toddler talk that mimicked our own speaking patterns. No words. Just sounds. Until that day.

Sarah was sitting in the sand, grabbing and throwing handfuls of it into the air with some degree of childish abandon. At that moment, the neighbor opened her back door to let Buffy out into the yard. As soon as the pooch spotted Sarah, she ran straight to the fence, golden fur flying, barking and wagging her whole doggy body. With a gleeful shriek and a wide smile, Sarah animatedly pointed at the dog and loudly spoke her first word . . . "Buppy!"

Wait. What? This was her first word? As new parents, we were momentarily nonplussed by our first child's failure to acknowledge our parental efforts. But we reluctantly conceded that the cute, fluffy puppy dog that gave Sarah such delight was clearly a winning influence, and we gleefully affirmed, "Yes! Buppy. Uh, Buffy. That's right. Buf-fy." We reveled in the magic of her first-word moment, knowing that very soon more words would follow. In fact, *Mama* would quickly win the "best parent" name game, signaling

the beginning of a growing verbal stream of new words flowing from her rapidly developing mastery of sounds and meanings. And we knew that it was all much more than a game. We were giving her words and language to shape her life, and she would return them with meaning.

### **First Words Last**

Why do we celebrate a child's first word? Why play the name game, or continuously offer words to an infant or toddler that are met with a blank stare, bemused smile, or even total disregard? We quietly chuckle at our child in the developmental phase recognized onomatopoeically as *babbling*, knowing that it represents the first attempts of our little one to mimic the talking they have seen and heard in others, especially in us as parents. In that precious "baby see, baby do" phase, a child makes early attempts at making the same kinds of sounds as ours, but they're not the same. The mechanics of speech are clearly working, but the meaning of it is not yet clear.

Still, well before sounds become real words, a child can communicate needs, wants, and feelings—pointing, holding up items, pushing things away, smiling, frowning, grimacing, grunting, crying, laughing. And then, at a time and for a reason unknown until it happens, all the incomprehensible practice at speaking and nonverbal communicating will be momentarily disregarded, dots will be connected between that child's mind, muscles, and mouth, and for the first time, a meaningful word will come out. Intelligent speech has begun. A verbal world is created. And it is good.

That long-awaited first word elicits an immediate and often riotous explosion of smiling faces, cheers, hugs, kisses,

and laughter from observing adults. So is it any wonder that your child will want to make that all happen again? Make sounds. Watch faces. Get rewarded. What was to your child a few moments before only a new thing to try, now receives such a positive reinforcing response from delighted parents that the impact is undeniable. At such an early stage of neural and physiological development, that positive stimulus might take several seconds to register, but the inevitable impression it will make is indelible, and with it the rules of verbal communication are being learned and internalized.

They are not written rules, and as adults we take them for granted, but for new word-makers they are newly forming revelations. The first rule is quickly learned—*words matter*. It's a world of words, and everyone around seems to like them and use them, so words must matter. But what makes them matter is what they do. The second rule can be considered the verbal equivalent of cause and effect in physics—*words make things happen*. Some will make more things happen than others, but words clearly cause effects. And as more words are learned that make more things happen, a third verbal rule is realized—*words mean things*. It's not enough just to make babbling sounds; it is clear that sounds—*words*—make most things happen, and certain kinds of words make certain kinds of things happen. So, in a nutshell, meaning matters.

Around this same time, your child will also learn that leg muscles can be tested and tried for becoming mobile. Their first step will also get a celebratory parental reaction, with many more words being spoken in response. Mobility is good too, but it's the mental muscle of making words that mean things and that make things happen that will shape

the new world opening rapidly to your child. And the more mobile they become in moving about in their expanding world, the more a fourth verbal rule becomes implanted in their brain—*words are everywhere*. No matter where they go, words are there. Though they can't express it yet, they know—words are everywhere because words matter, words mean things, and words make things happen. It's a verbal world.

And therein lies the answer to the question asked earlier: Why do we celebrate a child's first word? It is not because the child has taken a first step toward learning to speak. The ability to form sounds into words—to speak and use language—is innate and instinctual, preconfigured in every child's cognitive, physiological, sensory, psychological, and arguably even spiritual makeup and nature. The primary contribution of parents to that capability is biological, not pedagogical. We celebrate that first word because a properly used word is the first indication of a child's innate desire to communicate verbally. Parents do not need to teach their child *how* to speak—God has taken care of that. Parents do, however, need to teach their child *what* to speak, or how to communicate—that is the challenge and the influence of a verbal home. And that is why we celebrate first words.

The term *image of God* is never strictly defined by Scripture, but many suggest that the ability to speak and use language—to communicate—is part of that image in us. In other words, the eternal nature of the triune God is that of a loving relationship within the Godhead—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—and that is stamped on human nature as God's image: "Then God said, 'Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness. . . .' God created man in His own

image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:26–27, italics added). *Elohim*, the Creator God of Genesis 1, though translated as a singular noun, is plural in form, suggesting the Godhead. We are created to relate—to God and to one another—because our Creator exists eternally in a divine relationship of perfect love, and we bear God’s image.

But even more, God has designed and engineered us—body, mind, spirit—to be relational creatures. For the purpose of this book, the part of that relational design that prompts us to say with the psalmist that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” is speech and language. British theologian N. T. Wright notes the importance of the relationship between image and words: “One of the most powerful things human beings, God’s image-bearers, can do is to speak. Words change things.”<sup>1</sup> We cannot deny the importance of our verbal abilities when we recognize that we enter this world equipped in every way to speak and communicate. The only thing missing is the words, and God has provided family for that.

As children learn to speak, they are at first simply practicing how to use their God-given verbal competencies—making sounds with their mouth. However, that raw, natural ability will develop and mature over their first year, combining with other maturing abilities, until a word is spoken, the “first fruit” of a life of relationship with God and other humans. And the primary way they are made to relate is verbally—with meaning that matters and makes things happen. God’s world is a verbal world. It’s a world of words—given, received, and returned—and your home is where it all begins for your child.

Before exploring how to create a verbal home, though, we want to take an expedited tour of Scripture to make note of its primary language landmarks—a few selected passages from which we can gain insight into how words are woven into the fabric not just of our natural lives, but also of our spiritual lives. There is no doctrine of words articulated directly in God’s word, but there are anecdotal and narrative glimpses of God’s purpose and plan for words. We hope the few we focus on here will help you think of words as the many-colored verbal threads with which you are weaving a beautiful tapestry in the hearts and minds of your children.

## **Words Are God’s Idea**

Since we’ve been speaking of first words, it seems fitting to begin a biblical exploration of verbal parenting “in the beginning,” with the first words of Genesis. We’ll simply make some observations to learn what we can about God’s nature, the image that we bear, and the kind of world created for us.

Our story as humanity begins in verse 1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The earth is described as “formless and desolate . . . and darkness was over the surface of the deep.” But with a tingling sense of anticipation, the Spirit of God is hovering over the surface of those waters of chaos and disorder. Then, into the darkness, God speaks: “Let there be light.” The sound of verbal light in God’s voice momentarily precedes an explosion of visual light in the cosmos. In the words of Augustine, “But, first of all, indeed, light was made by the word of God.”<sup>2</sup> God breaks into time and space, not as an incarnated or visible being, but simply as a voice, speaking words that

will culminate in the creation of man and woman, made in His image, the pinnacle of His creative acts: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (1:26). The beginning of creation, and the beginning of humankind, are acts of speech, spoken by God.

We’re so accustomed to the opening words of Genesis that we might miss what’s actually happening in verse 3. God did not need to say anything. He could’ve simply envisioned by thought, or even just willed without words, all of creation into existence—one moment nothing and the next everything. God did not need to speak. British theologian and author C. S. Lewis, in *The Magician’s Nephew*, imagined Aslan creating the mythical land of Narnia by singing and roaring it into existence: “The deepest, wildest voice they had ever heard was saying: ‘Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters.’”<sup>3</sup> In the same way, the Bible says our existence was created by the voice of God. Not by a sound or a shout, but by words. Into the darkness, Elohim spoke two words in Hebrew, *haya or*. Literally, God said, “Let light be.” And the light that was not before, began to exist, because God *spoke* it into being. There was no one there to hear the words, and yet God spoke. Because words mean things and make things happen.

God chose to verbally speak creation and humankind into existence with language we could understand. As the psalmist would later say, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made” (Psalm 33:6). Words were not for His own benefit, but for ours. He spoke because He intended for us to speak, and for words to be the currency of our communication with Him and with each other. In that sense, speaking

everything into existence was a deliberate act of God—He was giving us more than just creation; He was *giving us words*. Those words, or language, are just as much a part of God’s created order as light, land, plants, animals, and us.

God’s use of words is reflected in the many references to “the word of the LORD.” According to *The Encyclopedia of the Bible*, “In the OT the word is the supreme means by which God the Creator makes known both Himself and His will to His creatures. This means that Biblical religion is primarily the religion of the ear rather than the eye.”<sup>4</sup> That is, it is primarily verbal. God speaks and we listen to His “word.”

The phrase “word of the LORD” occurs for the first time in Scripture just after Abram’s meeting with Melchizedek, the mysterious priest of God and king of Salem: “After these things the *word of the LORD* came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great’” (Genesis 15:1, italics added). About six hundred years later—having grown from one family, been enslaved and delivered from bondage in Egypt, received the Law on Mount Sinai, wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and now standing across the Jordan from and preparing to enter the Promised Land—a nation of nomadic people called Israel, led by Moses, are about to enjoy Abram’s reward, and the “word of the LORD” is clearly in view again.

Moses has gathered the people and reminds them how, forty years earlier, he had received commands from God on the mountain at Sinai, and how he then “was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 5:5). After reading the Ten Commandments, Moses then declares to the people what will become the most important passage in the holy writings

for faithful Jews, still recited twice daily for morning and evening prayers. It will later be called the Shema, from the first words in Hebrew in this passage, *Shema Yisra'el*:

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.”

Deuteronomy 6:4–7

As Israel prepares to enter the Promised Land, Moses reflects God’s charge to him in his charge to the families standing before him—the words given to him, that he is giving to them, are to be given to their children.

He tells the Jewish families that “these words . . . shall be on your heart.” It’s not enough to simply hear the words, but the words must be taken into their hearts. It is how they will obey the first command of the Shema to “love the LORD your God” with all their heart, soul, and being. And it is how they will obey the command that follows to “teach them diligently” to their children. Moses’ point is uncomplicated: They cannot teach God’s words to their children unless those words are first on their own hearts. Perhaps we should call this the first law of verbal-parent dynamics—you must have God’s words in your own heart in order to give your words to your children’s hearts.

When Moses charges parents to teach their children diligently, he uses the term *sanan*, which means to “sharpen.”

He could have used the more common word for *teach* that God had spoken to him about the children at Sinai (see 4:10), so *sanan* seems a deliberate choice. A child cannot be “whetted” like a knife, and yet the word is used symbolically of a “sharpened tongue” in other occurrences. Perhaps we should simply let the analogy speak to us—that the words parents give to their children should act like a symbolic whetstone to sharpen them for God, not just once but repeatedly.

The primary way to sharpen their children with words was to “talk of them.” They were to diligently teach and talk to their children. They were to be verbal parents. The Hebrew word for *talk* is the verbal form of the noun *word* in the phrase “the word of the LORD.” In a hyper-literal sense, they were to “word of them” to their children. And to our modern ears, attuned to literal language, we hear Moses saying that should happen at specific places and times. We think, *Let me get my calendar and get those scheduled into my day*, but to Jewish ears attuned to Hebrew parallelism that would use two opposites to express a whole, they heard Moses say it should happen in every place (“when you sit in your home and when you walk by the way”) and at every time (“when you lie down and when you rise up”). In other words, there was no place and no time in which they were not to be teaching and talking—giving their words—to their children. It was a picture of verbal parenting.

We’ve taken time to look at the Shema because it is, arguably, the primary biblical passage for verbal parenting. *Giving your words starts here*. Giving words to your children is not just about information, but also about transformation—what children hear and believe is what will shape their lives. It’s about words that shape the heart. Though we are no

longer under the Law that Jewish parents were when these words were first spoken, the principles of verbal parenting expressed in the Shema are no less timely and relevant for us as Christian parents today, more than three millennia later. The reality is that this admonition to parents will be repeated in Deuteronomy 11:18–19, remembered six hundred years later in Psalm 78:1–8, recalled in the parental monologue of Proverbs 1–7, reinforced by Jesus (who would’ve grown up reciting the Shema) in His “What is the great commandment?” teaching (see Matthew 22:36–40), and reflected in Paul’s instructions to families in Ephesians 6:1–4.

Christian parents today cannot neglect the importance of the Shema. God has designed us, from the beginning, to give our words, and His word, to our children. The prophet Isaiah said that just as rain and snow accomplish their purposes in God’s creation, so will God’s word accomplish its purpose. And in the same way, God’s words will accomplish the purposes for which He has given them to us, so that we may give our words to others.

## God Has Spoken

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, the “word of the LORD,” the “word of God,” “your word,” “the word,” and other similar references all point to God, who gives us His word. The poetic books—particularly Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes—often talk about God speaking. However, when we think of God speaking now, we don’t mean that He is giving new divine revelation that will become new scriptures in our Bible, but simply that He speaks through the words He has already given, which we now call Scripture.

We believe that God still communicates personally and individually through His Holy Spirit, but when He “speaks” now it is through His preserved written revelation, the Bible.

Nonetheless, understanding the reality of the oral culture of ancient Israel is critical to the concept of verbal parenting, because that is where the idea of “giving your words” was given birth. However, in this age of media, it is easy to lose sight of that foundational verbal and dynamic nature of God’s relationship with us as our Creator when we unconsciously rely too much on print, video, image, digital, and online resources to inform our faith and shape our relationship with God. There has been great benefit and blessing in those evolving aspects of our relationship with the “word of God” since the Creator first spoke light into the darkness, but we should also be aware of what has been lost over the millennia. We inadvertently risk falling into a reductionist form of faith that relies too heavily on the visual to the detriment of the verbal. The remedy is not in vilifying or diminishing the visual, but rather in reaffirming and prioritizing the verbal.

Before we move on to the New Testament, a brief peek at Psalm 78, by Asaph, will reaffirm the priority of creating a verbal atmosphere in the home. In the opening verses of his psalm, Asaph recalls the Shema—the giving of the Law when God “commanded our fathers that they should teach [the commandments] to their children” (78:5). He reminds Israelite families that the key to faithful generations is faithful parents who will “tell to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and His strength and His wondrous works that He has done. . . . That the generation to come might know, even the children yet to be born, that they may arise and tell them to their children” (78:4, 6). In the first eight verses, Asaph

uses nine verbs and six nouns related to verbal parenting to emphasize that children should “put their confidence in God and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments” (78:7). This psalm about faithful parenting is very near the center of our Christian Bible, offering a symbolic reminder that verbal parenting—giving your words—should be at the very heart of your parenting by faith.

### Jesus Has Spoken

But now we need to move into the New Testament. After David, things in Israel went downhill quickly—divided kingdom, Assyrian conquest, Babylonian exile, return to the land, and four hundred silent years with no prophet in Israel. Then Jesus was born, God was speaking once again, and the Christian era was inaugurated. But during the four centuries prior to Christ, the world had changed. Thanks to Alexander the Great, Koine (common) Greek was widely spoken. By the time of Jesus, few Jews still spoke Hebrew, often relying instead on a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible called the Septuagint. Also, the Roman Empire was rapidly expanding and extending its power, connecting nations in ways they had not been before. When Jesus began His public ministry around the age of thirty, He would be speaking into a culture of multiple languages. Most agree that Jesus, though knowledgeable of Hebrew as a rabbi and likely conversant in Koine Greek, primarily spoke in Aramaic, which was the common language of first-century Judea.

Putting aside the question of the language Jesus spoke, though, a more revealing question is about the *words* Jesus spoke—how we have the written record of the four Gospels.

Jesus was articulate and literate, conversing with teachers in the Jerusalem temple at age twelve so those who heard were “amazed at His understanding and His answers” (Luke 2:47), reading from the book of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth to start His ministry (4:16), and writing with His finger in the sand to end a confrontation with Jewish leaders (John 8:3–9). And yet, He left no personally written record of His teachings. Each of the four Gospel accounts was written by a follower of Jesus—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—and none cites any written source for their content. Though that might seem strange to some, to us it is a Jesus-shaped picture of the verbal power of “giving your words,” but only when you understand the nature of His ministry and teaching methods.

Jesus was a rabbi. That was not a formal title, but simply a term of respect for a teacher or master. Jesus was addressed as *Rabbi* twelve times in the Gospels, by His disciples and others, including Nicodemus, a respected Pharisee and Jewish leader. The common mark of a rabbi, or teacher, was disciples who were expected to follow, learn from, and become like their teacher. As Jesus himself taught, “A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). A rabbi would teach the holy writings of the Hebrew Bible verbally, and his disciples would hear, remember, and recall the rabbi’s teachings, stories, and parables. It’s one aspect of the oral tradition from which much of Scripture originated.

The public ministry of Jesus lasted only about three years, on a small patch of Middle Eastern land covering only about a hundred miles from north to south, and fifty miles wide. He was just a young itinerant Jewish teacher, one of many in His time, preaching about the kingdom of God to His fellow

Jews of Galilee in the north and Judea and Jerusalem in the south. He fulfilled the role of a biblical prophet, and yet He was more. His miracles would confirm His authority and divinity, but it was His words that would change the world. He claimed to be more than just a messenger from God, but to be the Son of God, and to be one in essence with God (see John 10:30). His words challenged Mosaic Law and temple sacrifices, offering the promise of righteousness and eternal life based on belief rather than behavior, on faith rather than formula, on love rather than legalities. His words, parables, and stories told of a personal God who wants to give us a new life, to enable us to be born again by the Spirit of God to become His children. This was a personal God the world had never known, and He was walking among His creation, talking with them as friends. His words changed the world not just because of what He said, but who He was. No one has given words like the words Jesus gave to us.

At least two decades would pass before the disciples of Jesus would begin writing their stories of the “good message” they had remembered their Rabbi had taught, “that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46–47). Those Gospel accounts would record the events of Jesus’ life and ministry, His teachings and parables. But don’t miss the hidden-in-plain-sight message in them for Christian parents—Jesus did not write His own gospel with stylus and papyrus, but with words and people. Jesus wrote His gospel verbally, by giving His words to His disciples.

The use of written documents would increase rapidly after the time of Christ, with a gradual shift from scrolls to codices

(books). Jesus, though, relied on the old-school method of oral transmission that also had served Israel for so long. In that way, He was a bridge between old and new—Israel and the church, the Hebrew Bible and the Christian canon, message and movement, verbal and written. The writer of Hebrews suggests that evolution: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son” (1:1–2).

The New Testament is full of Greek “word” words, hundreds of them, mostly variations of *logos* (word, saying, message), *rhema* (spoken word, statement), and *lego* (say, speak). Many of those words are attributed to Jesus, but He gave us more than only His words; He gave us God’s words: “He who does not love Me does not keep *My words*; and the *word* which you hear is *not Mine, but the Father’s* who sent Me” (John 14:24, italics added). But Jesus was more than just a word giver; the apostle John opens his Gospel asserting that Jesus was the very Word of God, “the *Logos*,” and that He was there “in the beginning,” not just with God but as God, who spoke the words “Let there be light” and made us in His image (see Colossians 1:16). In John’s words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1–2).

John goes on to make sure we know he is saying that Jesus was God incarnate: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). But what does it mean that Jesus was the “*Logos*”? The term, which originates in Greek philosophy, is used sparingly to

refer to “God’s word” as special divine revelation, and only by John in direct reference to Jesus. Though it is uncertain what was behind John’s use of *logos*, what is clear is that he opens his Gospel by mirroring the Genesis creation account. He presents Jesus to other Jews not just as a prophet, but as God—the same God they had worshipped from “In the beginning.” Similarly, he wanted to present Jesus not just as *giving* the words of God, but as *being* the word of God, the same “word of the LORD” that expressed Yahweh’s essence and mind to Jews in the Old Testament.

John mentions *Logos* as the name of Jesus only two times after the preamble to his Gospel—in 1 John 1:1 he calls Him the “Word of Life,” and in Revelation 19:13 the “Word of God.” For John, the Greek term *Logos* was the bridge between old and new. In his apocalypse, though, John clearly makes the connection: “and His name is called The Word [*Logos*] of God” (Revelation 19:13). In Jewish thought, one’s name was one’s identity. The angel told Joseph about the child Mary was carrying: “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). The name *Jesus*, derived from *Joshua* in Hebrew, means “Jehovah is salvation.” But here, John declares that Jesus’ name is also “The Word of God,” the full expression of everything that God is.

## We Must Speak

Hopefully, we’ve been able to lay the first few bricks of a foundation on which to build a biblical vision and a practical model for “giving your words” as a parent. Perhaps one final passage from John’s Gospel can become a kind of

cornerstone for that structure. It's from what is often called the "high priestly prayer" of Jesus, His last words after sharing the Passover meal in the upper room with His disciples on the night He would be betrayed and arrested. The words of His prayer for His disciples are especially relevant:

"I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and *they have kept Your word*. Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You; *for the words which You gave Me I have given to them*; and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me."

John 17:6–8, italics added

Even in the godhead, there is an order of communication that is not just a theological subpoint, but a model for us as followers of Jesus. God gave His words to Jesus; Jesus, as God, gave His words to His disciples; His disciples would give those words to others, "those also who believe in Me through their word" (John 17:20); and on it would go. All those words are given to be received and truly understood for giving ultimate purpose and meaning to our lives because they are from God. And as parents, we give those words to our children for the same reason. Jesus prayed that night for His disciples, but through them also for us as parents.

Jesus' words are eternal. When His disciples asked Him about His return, His response to them is recorded in each of the three synoptic Gospels: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away" (Matthew 24:35). In other words, a new heaven and a new earth are coming,

but the words of Jesus, whether given by Him or by others, will remain. And you may be thinking, *Well, His words may be eternal, but surely mine won't be.* But not so fast. Jesus also had something to say about our words:

“For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Matthew 12:34–37

That's a pretty heavy verse about judgment, but don't let that part distract you from what Jesus says about our words—they will all follow us into eternity, whether to justify us (the good words) or to condemn us (the evil and careless words). Remember, words matter because they mean things and make things happen. And they really are everywhere, in heaven and earth.

We shared a love for the Lord and for ministry when we fell in love, but neither of us came to our marriage with any experience with children. It was a journey into the unknown we would travel together. But as soon as we found out we were going to be parents, we started discussing what it would mean to raise our child for Christ. The first priority we agreed on was to read and talk about Scripture every day with our children. Even before Sarah was old enough to participate, we made a morning family devotional a nonnegotiable start to our day. Breakfast was the time that worked best for

us, to make sure that she would hear the word of God being spoken out loud, and words about God being shared personally. As our family grew, the morning devotional became a lively and verbally interactive time of reading, talking, and praying about Scripture. We spoke out of our hearts to our children's hearts the words of God. That word-driven priority never changed.

Giving your words to your children matters, both the words you give and how you give them. So let's talk about how to give living words so Jesus will find us "holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain" (Philippians 2:16).