

Becoming an Empty Nest Family

Opening Prayer

*O Lord, you have searched me and you know me . . .
You have laid your hand upon me,
The way I laid my hand upon his forehead when he was sleeping.
Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?
If I see my child in my rearview mirror come August, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of dawn and find his bedroom uncomfortably empty,
Even there your hand will guide me and hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely darkness of missing my children will hide me and the empty nest years become
night around me,"
Even darkness will not be dark to you.
You know me. Your hand is on me. You are there.
(An adaptation of Psalm 139 by Christy Fitzwater)*

Scripture Theme

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows
it very well. (Psalm 139:14)*

Introduction

You have spent the last two or three decades fully immersed in your calling as an *active* parent. You've navigated every stage of parenthood from infancy to launch. And now, while you will always be a mom or dad, the days of *active* parenting have come to an end, and your nest, as they say, is empty. What now?

Hopefully, this is a moment of triumph and pride for you. It may also be one of the most difficult transitions in your life.

Of course, you want your children to be independent, but you also want your family to remain close. Of course, you want some time and space and freedom for yourself, but you may feel guilty claiming it. Perhaps you have anticipated this day for a long time, eagerly awaiting its arrival and the perks it brings. And yet, now that it has come, perhaps you are not quite sure how to embrace it.

What's your calling as an empty nester? How will you adjust personally? How will your relationship shift with your spouse or partner? How will your relationship shift with your

children? These are just a few of the myriad questions that warrant dedicated prayer and reflection. God has an idea for you as an empty nester, no doubt.

At certain times in your life you may have carried the assumption that God calls you once, for just one purpose. Don't miss the call, or you might spend the remainder of your days in meaningless mediocrity. In reality, it is safe to say that God calls us many times throughout the seasons of our lives, and each call challenges us to stretch further than we might have anticipated or imagined.

This is one of those times. Embrace all the emotions, from heartache to elation, from anticipation to trepidation, for God is present in all of these, and ready to show you what's next.

What's Changing?

In his book *Managing Transitions*, William Bridges writes that transitions always start with an ending. Seems odd, yes, but he maintains that the first step toward a life change is identifying what you are losing and learning how to manage the losses.

When it comes to empty nest, the vacant bedroom(s) in your home may be a blatant reminder of what you've lost. As you look across the table at your spouse or partner, you might also realize that the two of you have lost time together, and maybe even have lost touch with one another.

For years, you may have craved more space, more time, more privacy, and more solitude. And yet now that you have them, you might realize that you miss the chaos, noise, and frenetic pace of family life as it was, because you really miss your child(ren).

Iris Ruth Pastor writes,

I hunger for structure, noise and tumult. Slamming doors. Loud TV. Wet towels on the bathroom floor. Cluttered coffee tables. Spilled cereal. All this order and quiet and discretionary time is making me feel unsettled, lethargic, and distracted. What is wrong with me? And am I the only one struggling to find a new sense of purpose, an alternate direction, a renewed sense of fulfillment similar to the one I got from raising my children?

It's all normal, of course, but knowing that doesn't make you feel any better.

Consider

Read the short article "Empty Nest Syndrome" from *Psychology Today* (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/conditions/empty-nest-syndrome>). Empty nest syndrome is not a clinical disorder or diagnosis. It is a transitional period in life that highlights loneliness and loss.

Write and/or Discuss

Jot some notes or share with others your responses to these questions:

- ◆ Have you experienced any of the symptoms of empty nest syndrome? Describe.
- ◆ What have you found to be helpful?

Reflect

As you embrace the empty nest and begin to cope with the losses involved, your calling in life shifts. Take a moment to reflect on . . .

- ◆ One thing I really look forward to . . .
- ◆ One thing that I have a lot of apprehension about . . .
- ◆ About myself, I think I am learning that . . .
- ◆ About my child(ren), I think I am learning that . . .
- ◆ About my spouse/partner, I think I am learning that . . .

All these wonderments and anxieties are normal. It's part of the shifting process. Acknowledge them and recognize that God is present in them. And pray for trust that God will reveal God's ideas for you and your family with clarity and certainty.

Take heart

Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:39).

What's Emerging in My Life?

Let's consider what might be emerging in your life as a result of these changes. As we do so, let us remember a few things that others have discovered about God's callings in their lives. We can say that responding to God's call will likely . . .

- ◆ Lead to happiness in the long run. If it makes you depressed, it's likely not God's call. Although it won't make you immune to all other emotions such as sadness, frustration, resentment, guilt, etc. But if there is no happiness whatsoever, somehow you are not aligned with God's desire.
- ◆ Not be easy. It will probably stretch you toward something you never thought you could do or be. But you can do it, especially if you have some help.
- ◆ Benefit others besides yourself. If it only involves you, it's not God's call. This is baked-in to parenting at all stages.
- ◆ Not be overly complicated. You'll be able to explain it to others in just a few words.

Consider

Let's focus on the first bullet point: lead to happiness in the long run. As you discern God's call amidst this life transition it's both worthy and wise to set long-term happiness for yourself, your child(ren), and your spouse/partner as one of your goals. This goal is not selfish. It's prudent. Happiness is an indicator that your life is aligned with God's work in the world. (It's not the only indicator, but it's an important one.)

In her article, "Celebrating the Empty Nest: How to survive—and thrive—after your kids fly the coop," Carol Kuykendall offers four lifestyle "tweaks" to help minimize the emptiness and focus instead on the potential fullness of the empty nest. Read the full article at

<http://bit.ly/2XMnlfo>.

1. **Tweak Your Attitude.** "As I spent more time with God, he transformed my attitude, changing the way I responded to this new season in life."
2. **Tweak Your Setting.** ". . . I began changing our nest in other ways as well."
3. **Tweak Your Family Traditions.** "As we learn to hold our children more loosely, we're growing closer and opening ourselves up to what God has in store for us in the future."
4. **Tweak Your Time for God.** ". . . we're relishing the opportunity to have more time for thinking, reading, or praying."

Write and/or discuss

Discerning and responding to God's call comes down to alignment. We seek to align the work that we do in the world with the work that God is doing in the world. Sometimes our alignment needs tweaking. From the article mentioned above . . .

- ◆ Which tweak resonates the most?
- ◆ Which tweak is most challenging?
- ◆ Is there a tweak you would add?

Take heart

Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your way with those who love your name. Keep steady my steps according to your promise, and let no iniquity get dominion over me. (Psalm 119:132-133)

How Should I Live?

Now we seek to turn the corner and fully embrace the call. We seek to develop fruitful patterns of behavior and action that bring fulfillment and grace to you and your empty nest.

Consider

In their New York Times article "How to Thrive in an Empty Nest" Lisa Heffernan and Jennifer Breheny Wallace offer some very practical suggestions for ways to manage the mix of emotions of empty nest and strategies for building a new, exciting chapter in your life.

- ◆ *Cope with the empty chair at the table.* Accept your feelings; make plans to see your child; schedule some fun
- ◆ *Stay close when they're far away.* Follow your child's lead; grab a seat at the digital dinner table; create new family traditions
- ◆ *Make the most of this new chapter.* Build a life that does not revolve around your kids; re-connect with friends

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/well/family/how-to-thrive-in-an-empty-nest.html>

Write and/or discuss

- ◆ After reading this article, which points resonate best with you?
- ◆ What new routines have you created to tend your empty nest?

Consider

Here are links to helpful practices and strategies for responding to the call of parenting a young adult.

- ◆ *How to Rescue Your Marriage from Empty Nest Syndrome* by John Beaty. With an empty nest, Lisa and Roger needed to find a way to reconnect their stories. Without shared meaning, their paths would have continued in different directions, leaving them like two ships passing in the night. <https://www.gottman.com/blog/rescue-marriage-empty-nest-syndrome>
- ◆ *Help for Empty Nesters* by Claudi and David Arp. While some couples look at the “empty nest” as a second honeymoon, it will end and couples will face the challenges of reinventing their marriage for the second half. For many, this can be a hard time on their marriage. Why? <http://www.foryourmarriage.org/help-for-empty-nesters>
- ◆ *Dealing with the Empty Nest, with Prayer* by Dennis and Mary Jo Weiss. Mary Jo and I have recently joined the group of parents who have labored many years to raise their children, then found that they have all “flown the coop” leaving us as “empty-nesters.” <http://www.foryourmarriage.org/blogs/dealing-with-the-empty-nest-with-prayer>
- ◆ *A Catholic Guide to Your Mid-life Calling* by John W. Miller. For the first time in my life, the famous visitation scenes of Scripture made sense. I had been knocked off my horse. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/01/11/catholic-guide-your-mid-life-calling>
- ◆ *The Empty Nest* by Judy Clark. Tom and Maribeth are college sweethearts married 29 years. They feel they have a stable marriage that has involved raising four children. It has been a wild ride of parenthood with a few hair-raising experiences. Still, they both agree that all four have been successfully launched into adulthood. And now that their youngest has recently married, they are truly an “empty nest” marriage, not just the “shifting nest” of college years and a few years beyond. <http://www.foryourmarriage.org/the-empty-nest>
- ◆ *How We Reinvigorated Our Marriage In An Empty Nest* by Iris Ruth Pastor. It's been years since our youngest child has left for college, but I remember that time well. It was a year of painful adjustment — a year of descent down an unfamiliar and unknown road in the quest to figure out life “after kids.” https://www.huffpost.com/entry/reinvigorating-marriage-in-empty-nest_b_8032608

- ◆ *Feathering Your Empty Nest* by Gregory Popcak. For parents who are prepared, research shows that the empty-nest years can be a great time for getting new levels of enjoyment out of your marriage and your personal life. Here are some things you need to keep in mind as you are approaching—or weathering—the transition into the empty nest.
<https://www.catholiccounselors.com/feathering-your-empty-nest>
- ◆ *Empty Nest: From a Single Parent's Perspective* by Debra Mitchell. Empty nest is synonymous with grief. Grief isn't just about death and loss, it's about change. Even when the change is something wonderful, something is getting left behind.
<http://bit.ly/2NebVfv>
- ◆ *The Prayer of a Mom Whose Nest Will Soon be Empty*. When that time is nearing when the last child will fly, God's comfort is there to surround you.
<https://club31women.com/the-prayer-of-a-mom-whose-nest-will-soon-be-empty>

Take heart

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. (Psalm 16:5-6)

Blessing for the Empty Nest

This blessing may be used with a small group or with the entire congregation.

To the Empty Nesters

Dear Friends, for two or three decades you have responded to God's call in active parenting. You have given of yourselves so that others, your children, can truly live. Your parenting has been a model of God's unconditional love for all of us. Today we congratulate you, and we bless you and your empty nest.

To the Community Gathered

Please extend your hand in blessing over our Empty Nesters. Let us acknowledge and honor the wide range of emotions they surely feel, from joy and freedom to heartache and trepidation. Please respond with "Amen" to each blessing.

To the Empty Nesters

As you navigate this life transition and seek to respond to God's call, may you experience the blessing of inner growth and understanding.

All: Amen.

As you encounter struggles and confusion in this call, may you be open to the Spirit's guidance as you do everything for the Glory of God.

All: Amen.

Whenever your heart yearns for the presence of your children, may you be comforted in the assurance of their love for you and God's gracious love for them.

All: Amen.

May God be a refuge to you on this new adventure, shade in the heat, shelter in the storm, rest in weariness, protection in trouble, and a strong staff in challenging times.

All: Amen.

May your nest be feathered with growth, learning, joy, and a recognition that God's grace abounds in each and every room.

All: Amen.

May God bless you with every heavenly blessing, and keep you safe and strong. Know that we carry you in our hearts each and every day. Through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen.