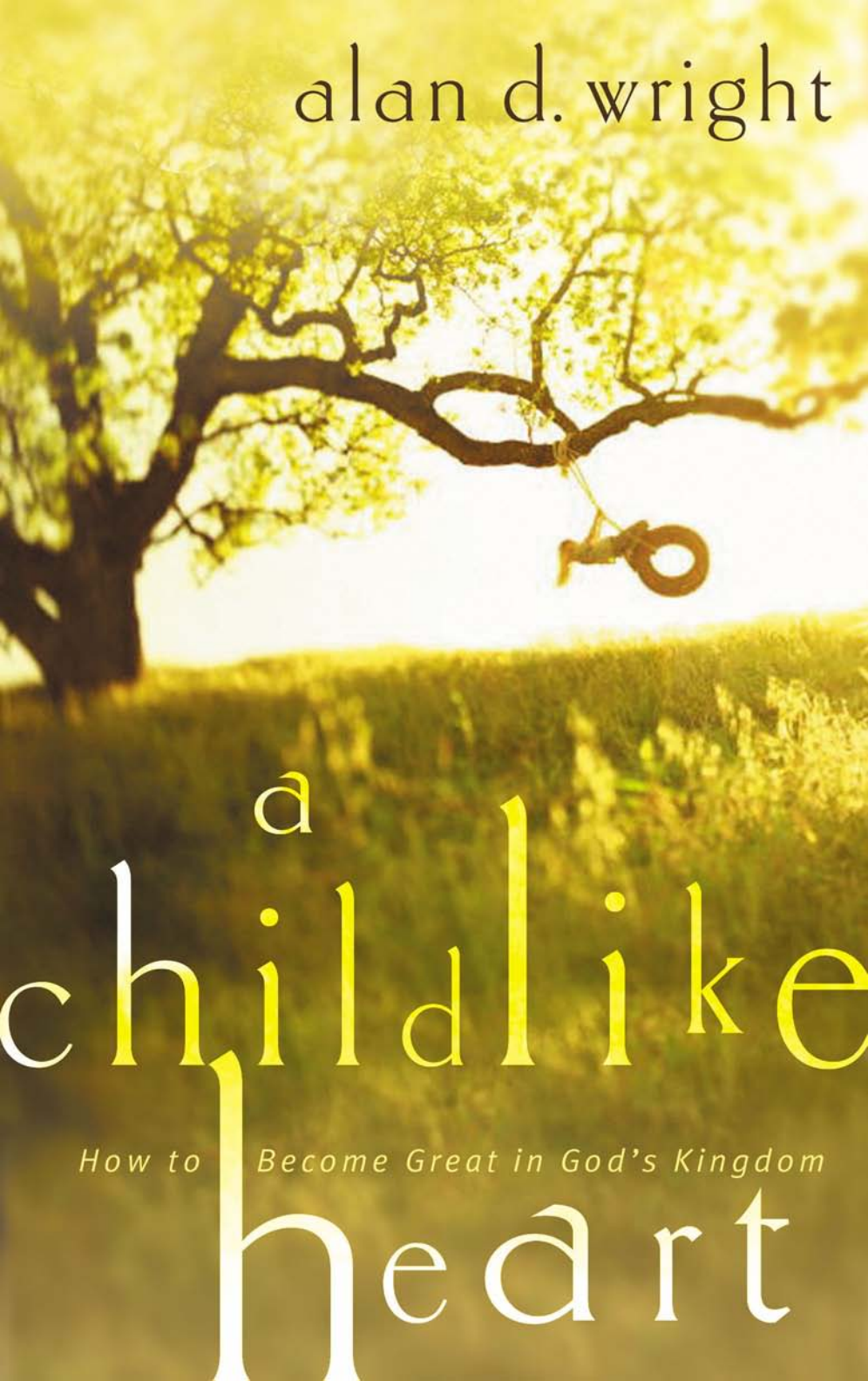


alan d. wright

A photograph of a child swinging on a tire swing under a large, leafy tree in a field. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset or sunrise, creating a peaceful and nostalgic atmosphere. The child is in mid-swing, and the background shows a field of tall grass or wildflowers.

a
childlike
How to Become Great in God's Kingdom
heart

“Sure I want to build my faith, but frankly, I’ve often approached the task with some measure of dread. Maybe God would need to put me through some practice drills—you know, like boils and fiery furnaces, shipwrecks and that kind of stuff.

If you have ever felt the same way, I invite you to pick up a copy of *A Childlike Heart*, find a peaceful spot, take off your shoes, wiggle your toes, and snuggle in the hollow of God’s hand as Alan Wright leads you on a journey back to childlike faith. It will change your life. I guarantee it!”

RAY MUSHINSKI, OWNER

LIMESTONE BOOKS, WINSTON-SALEM, NC

A CHILDLIKE HEART

Restoring Freedom and Wonder to Everyday Life

Alan D. Wright



MULTNOMAH PUBLISHERS

Sisters, Oregon

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The Joy of a Childlike Heart

“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

MATTHEW 18:3

Do you ever yearn to be a child again?

I sure do.

Life was slower and simpler then. My biggest financial burden was counting the money in the shoebox at the lemonade stand. My greatest fear was getting caught while trying to “kick the can.”

But life wasn’t just easier as a child—it was better.

The warm summer days in my North Carolina neighborhood were long. But they weren’t long *enough*. Sometimes I pretended not to hear Mom shouting, “Alan, come home! Bedtime!” I hated that word “bedtime.” Yuck! Bedtime meant the end of the day. It meant the end of shooting hoops at the Ryans’ house even if I was almost “around the world.” It meant I couldn’t see my friends until the next day (except for the rare treat of camping out

with buddies in the backyard). I hated bedtime. It was sort of like mealtime, an unwelcome intrusion into my childhood fun.

How different for most of us adults. We love to stop for big buffets in the middle of the day. And bedtime? It's no fiend interrupting our fun. Admit it—the pillow is more delicious than the buffet. The bed is a welcome old friend that invites us to rest and hide the pain of the day.

Something happens between childhood and adulthood that changes our mind-set from “I wish this day would never end” to “I'm glad this day is done.”

In fact, a lot of things change for the worse as we grow up.

Consider work, for example. When our little boy was eighteen months old, I carried him in the backpack as I mowed the lawn one day. Upon finishing the laborious task, I shoved the heavy mower back into the garage, hoping not to see the dreaded machine again for at least a week.

Mopping the sweat from my brow, I panted, “Whew, I'm glad that's over.” My boy, Bennett, on the other hand, wept and shouted, “More!” and tried to pull the lawn mower back out. I gave him an emphatic “No,” but chuckled as a strange thought occurred to me. *My toddler would give anything for the privilege of taking on the chores that I hate to do!* Consider the toys most toddlers want: plastic vacuum cleaners, fire trucks, dolls that wet their diapers, pretend ovens, and plastic shovels. What's the real

difference between digging a moat around a sandcastle at the beach and digging a trench for a drain at the construction site? Something happens between childhood and adulthood that makes work feel like work.

And what about the fun of learning? Do you remember the thrill of learning to read? I couldn't wait to read for two big reasons: I wanted to unlock the mysteries of street signs and sing all the words to hymns. But beyond the reward of reading the surgeon general's warning under the Marlborough man and singing all the verses of "Amazing Grace" was the sheer thrill of gaining new knowledge.

Every child celebrates learning. The love of learning turns babies into crawlers, crawlers into stumblers, and stumblers into walkers. Nothing stops children from learning. Hard floors and bruised knees don't defeat their crawling. And humiliating public tumbles don't hinder their learning to walk.

Adults, on the other hand, tend to try once...fail...and quit. When was the last time you tried your hand at a new hobby or sought a new skill? Something happens between childhood and adulthood that makes a Thursday night sitcom more desirable than a course in English literature at a local college.

And when did you last laugh? I don't mean a momentary chuckle at a funny joke. I mean a real guffaw. I mean the uproarious, buckled-over, breathless, begging-for-relief kind of laugh. I mean the uncontrolled belly laugh of

a baby who's being tickled. What adult doesn't crave such uncluttered joy?

Even childhood's disorderly, tearful moments are, if we are honest, deeply attractive. My toddler's fists full of chocolate cake don't frustrate me nearly as much as my own lack of such childlike abandon. And wouldn't it be healing if we could weep freely when we are hurt? Just imagine the hope that would be fostered if we could cry out for help in times of trouble.

Joy. Freedom. Trust. Peace. Imagination. Celebration. Spontaneity. Creativity. Curiosity. Openness. Wonder. Everything that makes life wonderful comes so easily, so naturally, to children.

Don't miss the irony here. Children experience such joy in life, yet they possess so few of the things that adults crave. They have no money, no prestige, no sex life, no power. They have few possessions and even fewer choices. How content would you be if someone denied you your "adult rights" to own property, drive a car, dine in fine restaurants, and choose when to go to bed? But think about it for a moment—have those adult rights ever brought you happiness?

Maybe you're reading this book because life has not turned out the way you imagined. Your sunlit expectations of a happy Christian life have been replaced with an eclipse of disappointment. Read on. There is hope in these pages.

Perhaps you're looking for a "holy breeze" to fan your

flickering spiritual flame. Maybe you can speak the proper evangelical jargon. You may even have earned several spiritual medals—mission work, spiritual gifts, ordination—you name yours. But deep down, if you're really honest, you realize that something is missing.

Or maybe you're wondering, "What's a Christian's life really supposed to be like?"

That's what this book is about. Every thought in these pages finds root in Jesus' words: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3).

These words of Jesus echo a common biblical refrain:

- "A little child will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6).
- "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise" (Matthew 21:16).
- "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3).
- "You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Matthew 11:25).
- "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14).

Join me for a journey back through the years. Hear the silly laughter of happy childhood friends. Feel the innocent

freedom of those unpretentious times. Allow yourself the luxury of unhurried thought. Relax and recall the best moments of your childhood.

But keep this in mind: The pages that follow hold more than cute stories about childhood. The simple metaphor of a childlike heart plumbs profound spiritual truth. Jesus invites you to more than a stroll down memory lane. He offers you complete transformation—from the inside out. It's not about changing a few behaviors or mimicking a child's demeanor. It's about becoming like a child, through and through. Just as surely as your body has no life without the robust beat of a healthy heart, so the soul lives abundantly only with a free, joyous interior.

Here's hope. Don't miss it. Please believe it. Jesus is offering you a whole new heart—the heart of a little child.



Becoming Great in God's Kingdom

Childlike Humility

*“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest
in the kingdom of heaven.”*

MATTHEW 18:4

Do you remember forming a circle in the schoolyard for a game of dodge ball or Duck, Duck, Goose? The teacher had everyone hold hands. Then, to make the circle bigger, she said, “Everybody take a giant step backward.” Strange, isn’t it? Some things only get bigger when we move backward.

Getting a childlike heart feels like taking a giant step backward. Let’s face it—as children we craved adulthood. We just couldn’t wait to be “big.” Big people got to stay up late and eat all the cake they wanted. How thrilling it must be, we thought, to take charge of our own lives.

Jesus’ invitation to experience childhood again might sound like a bizarre move in the wrong direction. Could it be possible that in order for our lives to get bigger, we must hold hands and take a giant step backward?



“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1).

The question betrays the disciples’ pettiness, so we’ve been taught. Here are the unsophisticated Galilean fishermen crudely arguing for bragging rights, so we suppose. How dare they expose their pitiful, personal agendas by even asking the question! I always imagined Jesus sighing with frustration, shaking His head, and rolling His eyes at their stupidity.

But, the more I think about it, the more I believe that asking, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?” wasn’t so bad after all. It wasn’t a trivial question.

It’s not like the disciples were asking Jesus whose mustache He liked best. They weren’t asking who was the greatest in the world’s eyes. They wanted to know who was the greatest in the Messiah’s eyes. What’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with wanting to be the kind of person who embraces the fullness of God’s kingdom?

By the way, we might reconsider our opinion of another incident for which we scorn the disciples: “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory” (Mark 10:37). What’s so bad about James and John wanting to be close to Jesus?

Rereading the Gospel accounts, I hear no frustration in Jesus’ response. Instead, He seems glad for this “teachable

moment.” Even in the Book of Mark, where we see the disciples silently embarrassed about their argument, Jesus fishes for their question by asking, “What were you arguing about?” (Mark 9:33). Jesus apparently wasn’t disgusted with them for wondering who would be the greatest in God’s kingdom. He seemed to *want* them to ask the question.

Maybe Jesus is waiting for you to ask the same question. Chances are, if you’re reading this book, you’ve already asked it. Allow me to rephrase it: “What kind of person has the most heavenly life?”

Isn’t that what all disciples of Jesus want to know? If your hungry heart has had so much as one tender taste of the Bread of Life, you crave more. If your parched soul has been whetted with even the smallest sip of Living Water, you thirst for deeper drafts.

Maybe the disciples asked the question because they had “[tasted] and [seen] that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8).

I don’t aim to smooth over the disciples’ rough spots. It’s true—they were, on the whole, a bumbling band. And they probably tried Jesus’ patience often. But when they debated the question of greatness in God’s kingdom, they landed upon Jesus’ favorite subject.

And so He taught them.

We always learn best by associating a new idea with an old, familiar one. The farmers of fertile Galilee could

understand sowing the seed of the Word. Casters of nets could become fishers of souls. Keepers of flocks could follow a Good Shepherd. So the Master Rabbi seized the moment and taught as He always did, by example. “He called a little child and had him stand among them” (Matthew 18:2).

The Greek word suggests it was a small child. In a similar instance, Luke says that people were “bringing babies to Jesus” (Luke 18:15). Mark says that Jesus took a child, a boy, in His arms (Mark 9:36).

I wish I could have been there to see why the Messiah was so good with children. I wonder if the Creator took note of how soft a toddler’s skin feels and squeezed the boy for fun. I wonder if the Holy One of Israel made a silly face to put the boy at ease.

Can you envision the sheepish grin that crept over this boy’s face as he was put into the eternal spotlight? Imagine the shock of Jesus’ astounding declaration: “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4).

The disciples were certainly surprised at this odd answer. They probably murmured in disappointment. A child? Children were nothing in that culture. They had no rights. They were nobodies. Why, the disciples made it part of their job to keep the pesky little people away from Jesus! The King of Israel could not be bothered with such distractions.

What possibly could be so great about this little child? The lad probably couldn't even quote the Torah. He had no ministry skills. No education. No money. No power. This boy couldn't preach or teach. He probably had never fasted or given alms. How could he be great in the kingdom? What could a little child possibly know that the disciples didn't know?

At least one thing.

That little boy knew at least one thing that most adults aren't so sure of: The boy knew that he wasn't in charge of the world.

Every child knows that ultimately adults are in control. Adults say when it's bedtime. Adults set food on the table. And only adults have the right to answer, "Because I told you so." Oh sure, our persistent little people try to manipulate us in every way imaginable. But their defiance is only a test to see how far we'll let them go.

Deep down, every child knows that adults are bigger, stronger, and smarter. Children are not in charge of the world, and they know it.

That's their key to Heaven on earth.

They seldom go to bed at night worrying about what tomorrow holds. Some adult, a parent or teacher, will determine what tomorrow holds.

Children have no concept of dread. Your little girl may not even know she's going to the dentist until she gets there. (Aren't you glad?)

Children celebrate better because they don't have to be the best at everything. They enjoy another's accomplishment as much as their own.

Their lives are filled with wonder because they know they've seen only a small part of a very big world.

Their imaginations are glorious because they don't assume that if they've never seen it, it can't happen.

Their work is really play because they aren't worried about making a mistake and blowing their careers.

Adulthood is so difficult because we act like we're in charge of our own destiny. The role of "destiny maker" is a draining one. Though we pretend to be masters of our world, we secretly know ourselves to be impostors.

We know we're not properly equipped to be destiny makers. No matter how meticulous our DayTimers, we really don't have any idea what tomorrow holds. We can't determine the most basic conditions of life, such as the weather or our health.

I once served as a counselor for third-grade campers at a Christian camp in the North Carolina mountains. It was an especially hot, dry, Carolina July. On the way to arts and crafts, I overheard one of my campers say thoughtfully to another, "I sure hope it rains soon. My grandmother's garden needs water."

Immediately his friend let out a confident war cry and began a primitive rain dance. A third child then chimed in, "Don't be so silly. God's not going to make it rain just

because of your stupid dance.”

Now defiant, the original “rain wisher” made a grand theological statement: “God can do anything He wants to!”

The first step to a childlike heart is the most important one. You must admit that God can do whatever He wants—and that you can't. It means accepting the fact that you are not in charge of the world, nor of your own life. You can't be a child and be in charge. You can't be a child if you are trying to be God.

I know you've worked very hard to get to where you are in life. The world taught you to take charge of your own destiny—it taught me that too. So it seems scary to let go of the little bit of control you feel you've obtained. It's hard to believe that life could be better with less control, less choices, and less power.

But remember your childhood. There was a time when you had so little, but had so much. And remember Jesus.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who being in very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God something to
 be grasped,
 but made himself nothing,
 taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—even
death on a cross!

(Philippians 2:5–9)

Children never grasp at equality with God. They know they're not in charge. God is waiting patiently for you to make that same, simple discovery.

Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven? The one who humbles himself most. And who humbled Himself most? The One who came from the throne of Heaven to the cross on earth. Don't forget about Christmas! Jesus had firsthand knowledge about becoming a child.

If it feels scary to let go, remember Him. Born in a cave, bedded in a feeding trough, the Lord of Lords became a child. You can too. I know it sounds strange. But the best step you could ever take is one, giant step backward.