

**Psalm 144:12 (1984 NIV)**  
***Sons like Trees, Daughters like Pillars***

12 Then our sons in their youth will be like well-nurtured plants, and our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace.

**Introduction**

When I was in Sec 1, I scored a rare first in my life—I topped my class in the year-end exam. I came back and told my mother and she was so happy.

Some days later, her younger sister (my aunt) visited us. With a big smile on her face, my mother said to her, “Ah Wai (my Chinese name) is first in class.”

This aunt took a glance at me and then said bluntly to my mother, “You allow him so much time to study. If he is not first in class, he better not live!”

I don’t remember my mother saying anything to rebut her. Maybe she herself was shocked to hear those words; maybe she herself thought my aunt was quite right to say those words.

But how did I feel? I felt hurt; I felt angry.

Have I forgiven my aunt today (she’s already deceased) for saying those words? Yes, I have.

Have I forgotten today those words that my aunt had said? No, I have not.

My point is this: The words that an elder in the family (whether a parent or an aunt) has said or not said to a child can have great impact on him/her for better or worse.

I am not just talking about words of encouragement or criticism. More importantly, I am talking about words of prayer for the child.

Psalm 144:1-15 is a war psalm written by King David. The first 11 verses are a prayer to God for victory. After praying for victory over his enemies, David declares the blessings that will come as a result in vv. 12-15.

It is very significant that the first blessing in v. 12 relates to our children. This verse is both a promise and a challenge. And most of all, it is a guide to prayer. It tells us how to pray for our children. If you have no children, this

psalm can help you as you pray and nurture your nephews, or nieces, or the children of your spiritual family in church.

Psalm 144:12 teaches us to pray for our children.

### **I. Verse 12a**

David begins with a familiar biblical image in v. 12a. We should pray that “our sons in their youth will be like well-nurtured plants”.

Another version (“The Message”) paraphrases it this way—“Make our sons in their prime like sturdy oak trees.”

This image has two parts that deserve special attention.

- First, these trees are “well-nurtured”. They are not trees growing in the wild, but rather trees planted by hand in a location specially chosen to produce the best growth—temperature is right, amount of sunlight is right, drainage is right, time of planting is right.

Honestly, I find this very complicated because I like just to dig a hole, put the plant in, throw in some fertilizer, water it once, and then forget about it until next year. But that’s not how it should be done.

- Second, these trees are well cared for so that they grow to maturity at an early age. Because the gardener tends to them constantly; because he knows about watering and fertilizer; because he pays attention to the young trees, they grow quickly to maturity. They grow strong, straight and tall at an early age. They spread their branches and bring forth fruit early. They grow quickly because their roots go down deep into good soil. Because the root system is strong and deep, even though the tree is out in the open (not sheltered, but growing in the midst of the world), it is standing tall in sunshine and shadow; in the heat and in the cold; in the rain and in the wind.

This is what we should pray for our sons. That at an early age they might be firmly rooted in the good soil of God’s Word; that their roots might be so strong and so deep in the Word that they can stand strong in every storm.

What does such a well-nurtured and well-cared for young man look like?

- His thoughts are pure.
- His actions are noble.
- His motivations are in the right direction.

But sons like this do not happen by accident. Our sons are not immune to the seductions of this world. So we should pray that our sons might be ...

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- Properly cultivated—watered and weeded.
- Blessed to flourish at an early age so that they bring forth the good fruit of godly character.

So let us pray that our sons will be strong and straight, and looking towards heaven. Not dwarfed by bad habits or foolish choices, not choked out by the weeds of the world, but young men of steely character who are strong enough to withstand the storms of life.

Sons like this do not happen by accident. We must pray for it; work for it; wait for it; believe God for it.

I say this to all the young people (especially the young men) in our congregation: “Get your roots deep into the Word of God. Grow close to the Lord. Find godly friends who can challenge you spiritually. Stop making excuses. Yes, the world wants you; your friends want you; the church of Jesus Christ wants you. Determine today to grow to be servant-leaders in God’s world and God’s church. And anchor that determination in the truths and teachings of God’s Word. Don’t wait until tomorrow.”

When parents pray against the worldly influences that their sons are exposed to, they pray that their sons even in their youth will be like sturdy oak trees.

Psalm 144:12 continues to teach us to pray for our children.

## **II. Verse 12b**

The second image in v. 12b applies to daughters in the family and is equally compelling. We ought to pray that “our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace”.

The New English Bible adds a crucial part to the picture—it says, “Our daughters will be like corner pillars, carved like those in a palace.”

In Bible times, beautiful palaces contained a number of large pillars that were both decorative and weight bearing. These pillars were cut from marble, highly polished, and carefully put in place. The most important of these pillars were placed at the intersection of two or more walls. They united various parts of the building, connecting one wing with another. These corner pillars were crucial because they held everything together. The craftsmen would take extra time, choosing the best materials, cutting stones to exact measurements, and polishing them to brilliance. The corner pillars were placed with great care because the stability of the entire building depended on them. If they were cut wrongly or placed wrongly, the entire building would be unsafe. But when properly placed, they became the foundation and connecting point for everything else. Thus, do not be deceived by the

emphasis on beauty and grace. These pillars are not mere ornaments added to please the eye. They are corner pillars that hold the palace together.

This is then the image of godly daughters. They are like those highly polished, carefully chosen, perfectly placed corner pillars that hold together the palace where the king dwells. There are both form and function here. Godly daughters are both beautiful and strong.

In many traditional families, the value and worth of sons are often given much more weight than that of daughters. But note what the Bible teaches here about the difference between the tree and the pillar.

- The tree stands outside the home, while the corner pillar upholds the home with strength and beauty. This is not to say that man must always be outdoors and woman must always be indoors.
- But the corner pillar is the strength of the home itself. When the pillar is weak, the house itself is weak. When the corner pillar is strong, the house can stand against the storms that rise against it.

This is what the Bible teaches us about the value and worth of daughters. So if you (like me) have daughters and no sons, don't feel deprived by God. But ask Him to bless you with daughters who would grow to be "like pillars carved to adorn a palace".

However, daughters like this do not happen by accident. There is no lazy and easy workmanship here. It calls for hard work in a parent's life.

In light of this, how should we pray for our daughters? Let us pray that they will be ...

- Graceful and useful
- Beautiful and strong
- Polished and perfectly placed

Someone once said that our daughters should be polished in three ways:

- First, with good education. A good education prepares our daughters to use their gifts and talents to the fullest. In the olden days, it was common to educate the boys and let the girls learn on their own. Thankfully, those days are long gone. Today there are abundant opportunities for our daughters to go as far as they can and care to go in their education.
- Second, with good manners. This suggests that having good manners is both an attitude of the heart and a skill to be learned. It involves knowing how to act appropriately in every situation and how to make others feel at ease in your presence.

- Third, with godly character. This is the greatest polish. Such a daughter is truly a cornerstone of godly strength. She is the one who keeps the family united. As she rests in Jesus, her husband and her children draw strength from her godly example.

The early church father Augustine was a wayward lad in his younger days. His godly mother, Monica, prayed for his salvation without ceasing. Eventually, Augustine repented and turned his heart to God, and later became an influential bishop of the church.

John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the Methodist Movement in England, inherited their talents as preachers, scholars and poets from their father. But their quality of character came, in the providence of God, from the indomitable example of their prayerful mother—Susanna Wesley. She left a godly legacy in them that eventually brought revival to the Christian Church in England.

Indeed, many a child has turned his heart to God by the power of a praying mother.

Others who had given personal tributes to their godly mothers (who were once daughters like pillars) include:

- Abraham Lincoln: “All that I am or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother. No man is poor who has a godly mother.”
- George Washington: “I attribute all my success in life to the moral, intellectual and physical education which I received from my mother.”
- Thomas Edison: “My mother was the making of me.”

If you consider these two images—the sturdy tree for son and the stately pillar for daughter, you might have thought that the images could have been reversed. After all, it is the women who are supposed to be bearing children like a fruitful tree, and the men who are supposed to be bearing the weight of family affairs like a strong pillar.

However, the Word of God in Psalm 144:12 applies the images in apparently reverse order—sons like trees and daughters like pillars—to emphasize the high value and worth of our daughters, especially in a culture of male dominance.

As we pray that “our sons in their youth will be like well-nurtured plants, and our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace”, we also need to pray for God’s desire for each family to be fulfilled, and that is ...

### **III. Each family to stand united and serve the Lord.**

It has been said: “The husband is the head of the home, the wife is the heart of the home, and children are the hope of the home.”

Every healthy home needs a head and a heart. You can't live without either, and you can't survive with two heads or two hearts. So, we need men be godly men and women be godly women. Let the head and the heart work together in joyful partnership, and the home will be strong.

David tells us to pray for sturdy trees and stately pillars. If we put these two images together, we are to pray that our children would have a strong foundation—that they would truly love the Lord, that their faith would be genuine, and that their faith would be visible to everyone who sees them.

The most beautiful people—men or women—are those whose lives are filled with noble purpose, who have found a higher calling than simply building castles of sand to be washed away by the tides of time in this life. They live and move to the call of something higher and bigger than themselves.

Sons like sturdy trees and daughters like stately pillars—such children don't come by chance. If we as parents want such sons and daughters, we must keep praying for this and we must keep working for this. Indeed, nurturing children to be like this is the work of a lifetime. But it is great and noble work. So don't give up on your children no matter how difficult.

One time in May 2009, a certain Rev Jeff Lee came to do a seminar on winning back the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation. He is a American Chinese and a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Christian, and was a successful cosmetic surgeon before answering the call to be a pastor, ministering among the Chinese churches in the US.

I had the privilege of hearing him at the combined Baptist pastors' fellowship. Jeff lamented that about 75% of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation in the Baptist and AG churches in the US would leave the church they grew up in at some point in their lives. He also stressed the importance of strong spiritual guidance from parents in a highly nominal Christian culture.

During the Q & A time, I asked him this question: “You are a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Christian. Your grandfather was a pastor, and your father was also a pastor. You yourself have given up your medical profession and become a pastor. What did you see and experience in your own family and church that had helped you to keep and grow in your faith?”

Jeff Lee gave a rather surprising answer. He said, “I was actually a prodigal son. When I was young, I didn't like how my pastor father communicated his faith to me.”

“We had family devotion time and he would ask me to read Bible verses to God and to him. Verses that say, ‘Children, obey your Father’ and ‘Wise is the son who listens to his father.’ He would ask me to read these verses aloud to God AND to him.”

“I expressed my unhappiness in various ways. When Chairman Mao Tze Tung died, I put on a black armband to mourn his death. My father was grieved too—not because Chairman Mao died, but because his son would choose to worship communism and not the Lord. My first girl friend was an unbeliever and when my father was against it, I protested in no uncertain terms.”

Jeff added, “But when I was in my 1<sup>st</sup> year of medical school, I saw something that impacted me greatly. I opened my bedroom door one morning, and I saw my father kneeling in front of the door. Though I tried to ignore him by sidestepping past him, I could hear him praying for me. And he kept praying for me through all the years.”

And then Jeff Lee concluded with these words, “I am not a godly son because I have a godly family line. I was actually a prodigal son whose pastor father didn’t quite know how to handle. I believe I am what I am today because my pastor father prayed persistently for me to return to the Lord. He did not give up on me in prayer.”

Indeed, if our family is to stand united and serve the Lord for generations to come, we need to pray persistently that our next generation will not become a lost generation. We pray that the mistake of the ancient Israelites will not be our own sad story—i.e. the first generation knew God, followed by a generation who knew ABOUT God, and ended with a generation who knew NOT God.

And not only must we personally commit to pray and work for this, we need the help of others in the Body of Jesus Christ. We need gifted Sunday School teachers, and godly uncles and aunties to help raise our children to obey and serve the Lord. This means that singles and couples with no children (or empty-nest couples whose children have long since left home) can have a powerful ministry of praying for and nurturing the children in the church. The whole church must come together to raise our children for the Lord. As the saying goes, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.”

Finally, let us not fill our children so full of earthly dreams that they forget to seek first the Kingdom of God. Challenge our children to follow Christ. Harbour big dreams that our children will grow to serve the Lord. I must admit that this is easier said than done, even for parents devoted to the Lord.

Iris and I dedicated Vera to the Lord when she was about two months old. As we and other couples were carrying our little ones to the front one Sunday morning in church, the minister said these words to the

congregation, “Today, these parents are bringing their little ones to the Lord, and to dedicate them to Him as missionaries.”

When we heard that, what do you think was our instinctive response? All of us (including Iris and me) momentarily stopped in our strides and wanted to turn back to our seats.

The minister was actually trying to tease us a little. He immediately added these words, “... dedicate them to Him as missionaries UNLESS the Lord leads otherwise.”

Indeed, godly parents want to harbour big dreams for their children to serve the Lord. But I must admit that they would often find easier said than done.

Hence, as we pray for our children, we are to pray for ourselves at the same time. Indeed, the best thing we can do for our children is to put the Lord first and we would have given them a godly example to follow.

## Conclusion

Praying for our children is crucial. Yet prayer must be complemented by appropriate actions. Some things we can do as parents beyond praying for our children:

- Be authentic and transparent.
- Tell them our own stories of faith (including our failures).
- Respect their views (be less judgmental even if we don't agree with them).
- Demonstrate to them what faith is (they look to us for spiritual influence and modelling).

And what can young people do to complement their parents' prayer for them?

Studies have shown that one common reason why young people remain in church is not because of the preacher, but because of their friends. And godly friends are gifts from God. So I want to encourage young people to build and value godly friendships among themselves. This is a very important groundwork you can lay down for yourselves in church.

*Pray that the Lord will help us build strong and godly Christian homes so that every father, mother, son, and daughter can say in unison, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”*

Amen!