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rites of passage ceremonies WARRIOR BLESSING

Ways to affirm boys as they become young men through special experiences aimed at celebrating Biblical manhood and Christian principles.

Historical Rites of Passage

Ancient cultures used to celebrate the moment that boys passed into manhood. In Greece, a boy became a cadet at 18 when he underwent a ritual where his long hair was cut off and offered to the gods marking his transition into manhood. In Rome, a boy between the ages of 14 and 17 removed his child's clothing and put on a plain white toga during a family ceremony. He would offer a toy to Apollo as a sign that he had put away childish ways.

In one ancient culture, a boy upon reaching the age of thirteen was given his first spear. He was then sent out into the hills outside of his village for a week or sometimes more. The boy would create his own shelter and live out in the hills until he was able to fully accept his role in society, after which acceptance he would return to the village. He would be greeted with a large meal prepared by the entire village. The event would end with ceremonial dancing and walking on ashes. The village would give the boy either a new sword or a pickaxe depending on his future occupation.

Some ceremonies seem more cruel and harder to accept. It used to be that boys who wanted to become Maasai warriors had to kill a lion first. This practice has largely stopped. In earlier times a group of young boys was required to build a new village and live in it for a lengthy period (often years) as part of the passage to manhood. This practice is dying out due to lack of land.

Many young Maasai morani (warrior-youth) still do the warrior dance where they leap into the air from a standing position in order to demonstrate their strength and agility. In a different African tribe, men sleep in a different part of the village from where the children and women stay. When a boy reaches the age of manhood, he goes out into the wilderness for a number of days. He then goes to stay with the men upon his return.

Jews celebrate a boy's passage into manhood with a bar mitzvah. It takes place the first Sabbath after a boy's thirteenth birthday. This is a big party where the family comes together to celebrate the boy and present gifts. After the ceremony, the young man is considered an adult in the synagogue.

Celebrating Manhood in Today's Western Societies

Some foreign cultures still celebrate rites of passage. But this practice has largely been lost in Western societies today. In America, there are primarily only informal rights of passage or milestones. Examples include receiving a high school diploma, joining a varsity sports team, obtaining a driver's license, senior prom dance, taking a military oath, the first legal drink, voting in your first election, the first hunt with your father, moving out of the house for the first time, getting married, going off to college, etc.

Unlike in previous cultures, there are no major milestones today. Instead, youth go through a number of smaller, less formal steps. Many of these are not unique to men, either. It can become confusing to know when a boy becomes a man. If you are a male and somebody asked you when you became a man, what would you say? Many times this question just produces a blank stare.

But it remains important for a boy to know what makes a man and when he ascends to manhood. This is especially true for Christians who want young men to find their identity in family and faith and not the culture around them.

In the absence of recognized rites of passage, boys create their own rituals to validate who they are becoming as men. Those of us in Christian communities can channel this desire for validation into a tool for improving the fabric of society.

With the exception of puberty, boys' and men's lives are not marked as clearly by reproductive changes that occur throughout their lives as women are. At puberty, boys develop more muscle and deeper voices, as well as body and facial hair. But deeper voices, bigger muscles, and more hair do not turn a boy into a man. Boys prove manhood by showing they are skilled and competent like their fathers, older brothers and friends.

Unfortunately, boys are so eager to find acceptance and brotherhood that they will even look for it in negative places if they can't get it from good, honorable sources. This explains why so many young men turn to street gangs. Once they pass through initiation rites that can include violence and illegal activities, they are welcomed into the gang as brothers. Sometimes gang membership is more about survival than replacing family connections, but it is always about belonging.

The longing to belong is fundamental to human nature—a good longing that corresponds to being made for relationship. The desire to be competent and capable and to test one's skills against another is also good. In a broken, sinful world, good desires sometimes turn to destructive ends.

Some young men run into a different type of problem. In today's culture, youth is idolized. Growing old and taking on responsibility is not viewed with the same level of

honor as it once was in Western society. Many boys, like Peter Pan, would love to stay young forever and live in a modern Neverland.

All you have to do is look at the 20-somethings who shirk away from responsibility and try to enjoy the fruits of life without paying the price for them. Young men want sex, but they don't want the responsibility that comes with it. They want a car without paying for it. They want respect without earning it.

Many aspects of pop culture today idolize people who demonstrate very little integrity. The less responsible someone seems, the more famous they can become. The heroes of a culture determine the destiny of a society because the things we esteem as valuable shape how we live out our daily lives. And our problem today is that many Biblical virtues do not play out well on MTV.

Teens are influenced to enjoy their youth to the max because many in society view growing older as moving backwards. The rewards of life don't seem worth growing up for these days. But youth will eventually realize that time marches forward even if they want to turn back the clock. This reality forces them to a crisis of destiny. How they respond to this reality makes all the difference.

The above cultural realities only indicate how important it is for Christian men to help the emerging generations understand the value, dignity and worth of the call to Biblical manhood. Developing a series of celebrations and teachings that foster this reality will help future generations embrace the transitions of life. It will lead to a higher quality of life because none of us can stop time.

Ideas & Tips for Creating Memorable Rite of Passage Ceremonies

Here are some important things to consider as you develop meaningful rite of passage experiences for your community and family. These thoughts are based on personal experience, historical lessons and Biblical principles. You will need to pray and discover how God wants to help you develop unique experiences for the young men in your life.

1. Involve the voices that truly matter most. Any meaningful experiences start with key relationships, especially the father or any other significant men in the boy's life. Just as we get our last name from our fathers, we also receive much of our identity and values from them as well. Boys must know that their dad cares. They need to know that their father and other men believe in them and will support them.

2. Don't forget the storyline. One of the things that attract us so to movies, sporting events and video games is the storyline. The outcome loses its meaning without the journey and struggle in the middle. It is the responsibility for Christian men to help boys discover that God meant their life to be an adventure. They have a story to tell and a journey to take. The images you use in the ceremony will leave a lasting impact even if the youth do not realize it at first.

3. Remind the pilgrim of eternity. If all we believe in is this life, it can be real easy to get disillusioned in all the evils we see in this world. What we do here does impact the next stage of the epic. While we should learn from the past and live in the moment, we must never live for just the moment. We walk each day via the light of eternity.

4. Focus on Christ. The rite of passage must connect the youth to Jesus as the source of life and truth. It should help him realize that the only way he can become the man he wants to be is by God's help. Jesus is our hero, and the one we should wish to emulate. You may need to counteract some of the untrue and negative stereotypes about Jesus and help the youth see how what He modeled for us is truly the best life possible.

5. Speak words of affirmation. You may have various men speak prayers or blessings over the young man. Consider having each adult provide a letter of affirmation to the youth. These can then be collected and bound in a special volume. These letters should identify ways that the boy is special, instruction for the future and encouragement to face whatever life throws at him. Vocal affirmations could be recorded and placed on a CD for the youth to take home with him.

6. Commemorate the moment with a token or gift. This could be a highly individualized thing or something that is fairly standard. For example, some fathers may provide a knife, watch, plaque or Bible to commemorate the moment. Gifts with meaning attached to them can provide the greatest impact. In the past, I have given an hour glass, a knife and an ornate compass.

7. Preserve the sanctity of the moment. This ritual should not be hazing or abusive in any way. It may involve a test or trial. But the trial should have a purpose. It should never be to denigrate the person or abuse him in any way. No lustful or sinful act should ever be incorporated into such a solemn moment. That is what happened in some ancient cultures, and their societies paid a high price for it. These moments created soul wounds and scars not opportunities to seize one's destiny.

8. Give direction. This is more than just a party although it certainly should be a celebration. The rite of passage experiences provide a unique opportunity for one generation to speak to another. The older men should issue challenges and direction. They should be willing to speak about their failures and how they wish they had done things differently. These lessons can provide markers for the next generation.

9. Present a balanced, Biblically accurate view of men. Adolescent boys must come to understand that a man can be rugged, bold and daring as well as tender, loving, sensitive and creative. Boys need to know that some characteristics traditionally seen as feminine are just as important to the makeup of a good man as any traditional male characteristics. On occasion, a man has to push past the emotion in a tough situation to act. At other times, it is perfectly appropriate to show emotion or even cry.

10. The rite of passage event marks a beginning not an end. The ceremony is important. But youth can experience isolation and discouragement if they feel it marks a stage of life where they are alone. Mature men should continue to involve themselves in the lives of the young men. The rite of passage event does symbolize a new sense of responsibility placed on the backs of the young. But this should always be done within a loving community not isolation.

Rites of Passage Examples

Here are some specific examples of various rite of passage ceremonies and experiences. Of course, you can mix and match ideas to suit the boys you intend to honor.

One experience that I had involved a 16-year-old boy whose father died of cancer a few years before the rite event. I took the boy out for a prayer walk to a nearby camp. While walking on a path, I stopped and shared my gift with him and prayed with him. Then we came across the next person he was to meet. A number of men met with the boy along the path. Then we all regrouped to have communion and a time of reminiscing as a group. Each adult gave the young man a gift and a letter.

I have heard of some men taking a special camping or hunting trip with the boys who were to be celebrated. Some men use a road trip or mission's endeavor as the perfect opportunity to commemorate a boy's passage to manhood.

One group that I heard about took a number of young men to the country. The event began with the leader discussing the difference between how a man thinks and how a boy thinks. Then, he gave them a piece of paper to record their own unique boyish attitudes.

Each boy was then sent at regular intervals on a long walk across the plain towards a series of blazing torches. The boys were encouraged to reflect upon their lives as boys and the differences that life would be as men. Five torches were stretched out over a wide variety of terrain. At each torch stood a man, these men gave directions and a short idea for the students to think about while they walked.

At the last torch, the boys were directed towards a tepee in a grove of trees near the river. Then, the boys entered the teepee and sat down with a group of senior men. In their own time they chose to burn the paper on which they'd written their boyhood thoughts. After all the boys went through the experience, all the men gathered around the fire and had a very frank discussion about the temptations that young men face.

Checklist – Questions you should ask?

1. What are the requirements for the rite of passage event? Is the ceremony to be done at a particular age or when the boy has demonstrated certain levels of maturity or ability?
2. Should the experience be a surprise or something that the boy knows is coming ahead of time?
3. Should the experience be a private thing for men only? Or should it involve females and children?

4. Should the experience be an event consisting of a couple of hours or drawn out over a number of days? Should the experience involve a trip somewhere?
5. What Scripture lessons should be the focus of the experience?
6. What approach would work best for the boy(s) involved?
7. Should the men bring gifts, letters, etc.?

When the ceremonies and congratulations are over, the new men have a choice to make. They will make this choice everyday for the rest of their lives. They will have to choose whether or not to act as honorable, godly men.