

FamilyLife Blended Podcast

References to conferences, resources, or other special promotions may be obsolete.

Season 5, Episode 110: Growing Up Blended: Siblings Who Fight

Guest: Dr. Darrell Bock

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Ron: Hey friends, this is Ron Deal. Just want to let you know that we're aware that there are a number of audio glitches throughout this episode, and we apologize for that. I just hope it doesn't get in the way of you being able to benefit from the message of this episode of *FamilyLife Blended*.

Darrell: The stepparent never replaces the biological parent, even if the biological parent is absent, provided the relationship with the biological parent was present enough to establish itself in the relationship of the child.

Ron: Welcome to the *FamilyLife Blended* podcast. I'm Ron Deal. We help blended families, and those who love them, to pursue the relationships that matter most.

It is almost here. *Blended and Blessed*®, our annual livestream event is just around the corner. It's here for blended family couples, April 29th, 2023, and you can attend from anywhere in the world. If you've never heard of this event, it's amazing. All you have to do is log in on your smartphone, your laptop if you're sitting at home. Or your church can host this for yourself and other couples in your church or community. It's very simple to do. It's not too late; be in a live stream, my goodness. Register now; start the process. You're going to be ready to go on the 29th.

If you don't know what *Blended and Blessed* is, just think marriage seminar, but one specifically designed for blended family couples. The theme this year is Living Blessed. It's going to include topics from Brian and Jen Goins, for example, on a blessed marriage in a blended family, specifically.

Dr. John Trent, one of my heroes in family ministry, is going to be with us talking about the blessing for children. How do we help our kids grow up to be all that they're/that God intends them to be?

Cheryl Shumake is going to be talking about bonus blessings in a blended family, and I think that's going to include some perspective, like, you know, the journey and if you stick with it, some of the blessings that come in the process of loving the people in your blended family.

I'm going to be speaking on kingdom blessings in a blended family. I'll be talking a little bit out of the Sermon on the Mount; that's all involved in this year's *Blended and Blessed*. Please don't miss it. The show notes will tell you how you can register and be involved with that.

Quick reminder that all of this year we're listening to you. One of the things we want to hear from you is what we call your Promised Land stories. That's where you just share about something that's getting better for your family, not perfection. Nope, nobody's going to attain that. Just how things are turning the corner perhaps, or something you've experienced lately that tell you you're moving in the right direction. Those little moments that just tell you, "Yes, we're moving towards that promised land." You can write to us, email blended@familylife.com, or you can call, leave a voice message. We may use that audio in one of our upcoming podcasts. Again, the show notes will tell you how you can get involved and share that.

You can also write us a review. We love that. We appreciate that. It helps others find us as well. Recently we heard on Facebook, "This is a wonderful ministry. There's not enough in churches for blended families and there needs to be." Well, we would agree with that so thank you to that person for writing in.

If you're not familiar with FamilyLife Blended, you might not realize that that's what we do is we encourage and equip blended family couples. We've got live events; we've got virtual events; we have small group resources. We have books that you can read, articles online, all kinds of audio files and things that you can listen to, and we train leaders to equip blended families in their local church.

So, for example, Preparing to Blend is coming up soon. It's a two-hour training to help pastors and mentors know how to help couples that are forming a blended family do their premarital counseling. And we also have ministry strategies for local churches to try to help them be more relevant to the blended families in their church and in their community. If you want to know more about that, please let us know.

My guest today is really invested in that second one. He spends his life, day in and day out, equipping leaders in the church to help the church be all that God has intended it to be. Let me tell you about him. Darrell Bock is Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas. He also serves as the Executive Director of Cultural Engagement at the Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership, which is connected to DTS. He serves on multiple academic boards. He's an elder at his church. He's authored or edited 45 books. I'm just exhausted saying that out loud. He and his wife Sally, have three children and five grandchildren. Forty-five books, Darrell, come on. My goodness, that's a lot. How do you do that?

Darrell: Well, I don't know. We're trying to clear out the forest in the Amazon and have had some success so that's great. [Laughter]

Ron: Well keep up the good work. You know I have had the privilege of being on your podcast that you do for Dallas Theological Seminary a few times. And my goodness, I have had so much fun coming alongside you and working; get invited to be part of chapel a couple of times down there with the students. It is a lot of fun to work with you. I am thrilled that I'm getting to turn the table on you, if I could say it that way, and interview you for the first time. Do you have a favorite out of all of those 45 books that you've contributed to? I'm just curious.

Darrell: Oh, I get asked that a lot. Not one because they're all different and they walk into different spaces, and so as a result, there's not one. I have some that I'm partial towards because of what they did. I did one on the Da Vinci Code that obviously did very well, and that my wife was very grateful for because it did very well. [Laughter]

And then I've done one on the gospel that's kind of close to my heart because I was trying to say things about the gospel, I think the church needs to hear. But a lot of my writing has been in the area of either the gospels or explaining Jesus to people with a rich kind of biblical cultural background and those books I've also enjoyed writing, so I don't have one favorite. I've got areas that I kind of swim in, and so I jump from one pool to another and enjoy being able to shift around.

Ron: Oh, that's great. It's a little bit like asking which of your kids is your favorite. [Laughter] You can't really nail that down.

Darrell: Exactly right. And on a blended family podcast, that is a really loaded question, so we'll just leave it there.

Ron: I'm just going to tell our listeners that today's conversation with Darrell is actually part of a little ongoing series that we have on this podcast. We call it Growing Up Blended. And what we do is we talk to somebody who grew up in a blended family, and now, as an adult, has the advantage of hindsight to help the rest of us understand a little bit what it is to be a kid growing up in a blended family.

So not everything Darrell is going to say today is going to match the experience of your children, for example, but it might just give you a little window, a little perspective into what they might be experiencing. My guess is something we're going to talk about is going to connect to the kids in your world and so that's it. Take that and run with it and just enjoy the insight.

We also know that a lot of our listeners grew up in a blended family themselves, and as an adult, they're just kind of thinking and talking and unpacking their childhood experience. So that's what we have the opportunity to do today.

Darrell, before we jump into your personal childhood story, I just want to ask you—you're surrounded by people who live, eat, and breathe the local church, who think about scripture a whole lot, who spend an awful lot of time unpacking that so that they

can teach others what it means and what it says to us today—how often is the subject of blended families brought up in those academic circles that you find yourself running in?

Darrell: Not often and not enough. It really is a rare combination of a rare situation where it comes up, which is amazing because as you recall, when you did chapel with us, we probed our audience about how many people were members of blended families. Around one third of the audience raised their hands, which surprised me that the number was that high with seminary students.

Ron: Yes.

Darrell: It's a reality for a lot of people, even in audiences that you might not anticipate, but frankly, the topic doesn't come up very often. We are stuck in simply talking about our aspirational hopes for families in the ideal family in talking about the way we interact and the breakdown in a family in which we're not thinking about the possibility of mixtures and that kind of thing. And so, it's something that needs to be talked about more.

Ron: Well, I have certainly appreciated you putting it on the agenda for DTS, for example, and sort of bringing that up. That's part of what you do at The Hendricks Center for Cultural Engagement is help people think about culture and how do we engage and have the church be relevant? And so certainly it's a topic of conversation that needs to be—who knows, maybe, DTS will lead the way in seminary/seminaries today and next thing you know, we'll have a blended family, I don't know, program or certificate or something. I don't know if that's possible.

Darrell: Yes, well maybe the answer is to form a seminary that's called Blended Theological Seminary and then we'll be BTS, and we'll go from there.

Ron: [Laughter] I like it. I like that a lot. Okay, let's talk about your childhood a little bit.

Darrell: Okay.

Ron: How did your blended family journey begin?

Darrell: Well, it began out of a little bit of tragedy to be honest. My biological mother passed away when I was 14 years old. I am one of four children in the family, and I'm in position number three and have a brother who's seven and a half years older than I am. I have a sister about four years older than I am, and then I have a little sister who's only eighteen months/we're only eighteen months apart. That will be important later in the story.

Ron: Okay.

Darrell: My brother, when my mom passed away, was already out of college. My sister had just gone to college. I was a sophomore in high school and my little sister was either in eighth or ninth grade. I can't remember if she was one or two years behind me in school. We were all over the map and that death was important because my mom had had cancer since I was eight years old. We had been attending a church, a moderate theological church I would say, up until the time I was about eight years old when she had her first surgery. And then she was in and out of surgery over the next six years, multiple times and so that broke up our exposure to the church as a family.

The/an important feature of this is my parents confided in my older two siblings about where mom's health was pretty much all along the way because they viewed them as old enough to be able to deal with it; but they did not do that for myself and my younger sister so we experienced/my younger sister and I experienced the death in a very different way than my older siblings did.

In fact, I didn't know that my mom was very close to dying until my brother showed up outside my door in an English class that I was sitting in. I'm looking through the louvers of the door and I can see his face. My first thought is, "What in the world is he doing here? He's supposed to be in law school or in college." When I walked out, the first words he said to me is, "She's going," which means mom is dying and I had no clue it was even close.

So that was like a shock and this, the nature of this experience was challenging for me, but it was even harder on my younger sister who was totally caught off guard and it literally threw her off the tracks emotionally for about a 10, 15-year period. So that's where—sorry, so now, we're in a family in which I have a dad who works, who travels like crazy, and in a job that causes/that is causing that. And then there's—my little sister and myself were at home and then two children who were away and so we were separated from the experience of what was coming for dad.

Ron: Yes.

Darrell: We did have an older lady who lived with us who kind of watched over us, so we weren't totally on our own, but that was the context.

My dad eventually started to date someone and eventually married this woman. It was someone who my little sister and I got to know, but it was someone who my older siblings really didn't get to know, and so that's—when he got married, there were all kinds of reactions to what was going on when that happened. That was about probably four years later or so. I actually don't know the/I don't remember the exact time.

Ron: Okay. Let me just pause you right there. There's so much in what you just said. First, I'm wondering, in hindsight, do you know why your parents didn't tell you and your younger sister what was going on with your mother?

Darrell: Yes, well, we knew she had cancer and that she was going in for surgery, but we never were told/we were left to figure out how serious that was. Let me just say it that way and so we weren't completely in a dark room, but we were not nearly as informed as my older siblings were.

Ron: Well, let me just tag onto that. Throughout the time that Connor was in the hospital, neither my wife nor I, nor our other two boys ever thought that Connor was going to pass away. We were praying; people were praying. We were fervent in that prayer. It just never occurred to us that that might really happen. Even when the doctors came to us and said, "We've got to transport him from Amarillo, Texas," the hospital where we were at the time, "down to Dallas Children's Hospital," and they said he might not survive the flight, I mean, I just didn't believe him. I just never gave it a thought that he was going to pass away. We were praying and that was it.

I just think that's the natural tendency of people who have a basic trust in God. We sort of had this natural positive outlook about life. It didn't surprise me at all that you and your sister didn't/really, we're not prepared, if we can even use that word, for your mother's passing. You just assume the best.

Darrell: Yes. I mean, you know she had come out of every surgery that she had ever been a part of, so we just thought, "Oh, she's back in the hospital for one more round." And so that was kind of where things sat at the time and we—you know the hard part is that I was an ADD child and was one of the first, probably, Houston children put on Ritalin when I was growing up. I used to drive my mother crazy and so because I was this bundle of energy, they would have me run around the house before dinner, so I would sit at the dinner table—that kind of thing. [Laughter]

I knew that my relationship with my mom was kind of a challenge for her. If I had known she was in the process of dying, there would've been things I would've liked to have said to her that I never got to say, even as a 14-year-old that I didn't get the chance to say. And so that, that was significant to me in terms of the nature of the experience.

Ron: Wow, so it's a huge shock for you and your sister. I'm sure it was for your older brother, but there was at least this gap in what you knew and how you received it. So eventually you're going to date again and marry, and it sounds like that was two, three, four years.

Darrell: Yes, let me go back and pick up a piece that I dropped, and that is in your question. That is: what was it that motivated my parents not to tell us? And I think it was, they thought they were protecting us. They thought that we were so young and would be so perhaps bothered by the news of the reality that they were trying to protect us. And my reaction out of that has been I will never try and protect my child from something that's coming if it has the potential to really be life altering in terms of what they need to know. I mean, because the impact which was hard on both, myself and my

younger sister, it was even harder on her and so just watching the—even though it was a very well-intentioned act of protection, it didn't end up really protecting us in the end.

Ron: I'm sitting here thinking about so many times through the years we've had people contact our ministry and say, "There's pieces to the story of our divorce that we've never told the kids." And you know, it's, "What do we do with that?" On the whole, I just think keeping secrets does not serve children well. It sounds like your experience would support that.

Darrell: Yes, I, like I said, the decision we've made in our family has been to try and keep our kids informed on anything that comes close to that. Fortunately, we haven't had anything near that level to have to deal with but yes, it's/I think it marked all of us in that regard.

Ron: Sometimes on this program and in my writing, we talk about the quake that ultimately led to a blended family being formed. Your mother's passing was that massive earthquake. There are always aftershocks, and I think for a lot of parents, we sort of miss the aftershocks that our children experience. That is in between mom's passing and dad remarrying there's years of single parent. Life is very different now; around the home it's just you and your sister. The older two are out of the house. Some woman's coming to help kind of oversee or care for you a little bit, but certainly not mom.

I'm wondering, what were some of those other aftershocks for you?—any changes in school, Dad relationship, anything like that?

Darrell: Yes, there are lots of elements. First of all, the woman who cared for us had been a part of our family really since I was born. So she was in the house, lived with us, so she was—it was like having a relative in the house if I could make an analogy. So that's important because it was not an in and out. She was very connected with us in many ways.

The second element is that I think's important here, and I don't know to define it as an aftershock or just the reality of it is, is that when my dad started to date the woman who became my stepmom, she was in and out, around. She was sometimes around when he wasn't in terms of just being available. She had three children of her own who I was getting to know, in the midst of that, so there was that dimension of managing that—three younger children. They were all younger than either myself or my younger sister. They were becoming a part of our lives, on a regular basis, especially when dad was around.

She was helping me negotiate my teenage years, as we drew closer to each other, et cetera but then when she was not around and the person who took care of us was around but wasn't really a parent figure in many ways—just an administrator of the house, if I can say it that way—I was in the odd position of having to be a brother and a

dad to a sister who was only 18 months younger than I was and was going through her own teenage adjustment along with the shock of how the death hit her that I was having to work to some degree to manage, you know in the home.

And so that was the—that was probably the biggest aftershock was the way it changed the way I had to relate to my sister Jody and what that involved for us as we kind of flipped sometimes. You know sometimes we were interacting as brother and sister and sometimes I was having to function almost like a way to young surrogate dad. That was the challenge and then my stepmom to be, and then eventually my stepmother, was helping me negotiate some of that when she was around, when he was in town. Which was, he was out as much or more as he was in, so it was a very disruptive lifestyle that was a part of our real life.

Ron: You kind of playing dad role a little bit with your younger sister; that had to be confusing for both of you, and I imagine—

Darrell: Yes, very confusing for both of us. Yes, and she didn't appreciate it when I flipped roles, you know? I mean, I'm a brother; I'm not a dad.

Ron: That's right.

Darrell: And so that was a challenge. And then I think the other part of the big picture in terms of the total story and where we're headed is I went through that and my younger sister went through that and we got to know the stepmother to be, if I can say it that way. Okay, but my older siblings didn't have that experience. They were totally detached from the relationship with someone who was going to become their stepmom.

Ron: And so, when she entered the family formally, when your dad married her, what was the impact on you and your siblings at that point?

Darrell: Well, we all had different views about what was going on and very different views. My older siblings had questions about the wisdom of dad marrying this woman. I have never talked to them about why that was, but they weren't thrilled with the marriage. Let's just put it that way.

Ron: They were worried about something.

Darrell: Yes, and then, my younger sister was so coping with the loss of mom and the fact that this woman could never be that, okay, that the remarriage was hard for her. I ended up out of the four, being the one, I'll say it this way, who was the most accepting of what had happened. Okay, and having to deal with, to some degree, the various reactions when everybody was together to what was going on in the way people were being viewed in that relation/in those relationships, et cetera.

And being in an odd position in another sense in that I'm not the oldest, okay? I'm not even the second oldest. I'm the third oldest. I'm probably the closest to her in some ways because of where I was in my status of life. And so all that impacted the way we were all perceiving what was going on.

Ron: That had to create a little bit of a wedge between you and your other siblings. I mean, you're moving towards the stepmother and they're not moving towards her. I don't know if they, you would say they were moving away or they were just, they just weren't moving at all. But did that create some conflict then between the four of you?

Darrell: I would say yes, but I guess the blessing in it is that the two older ones weren't around a lot as it was because of where they were in their stage of life. It wasn't this constant reality that you would have had they been younger. And so that made it in some ways more manageable but it was definitely there.

There are conversations that took place where the set of concerns that my older siblings had about what was going on were, in my mind, ameliorated by the way my stepmom had been of help to me. I was processing, they're getting this reaction and they're reacting this way and they've had distance. I understand that much, okay. I kind of get it, on the one hand, but that's not how I'm seeing this situation myself. I guess that ended up being, in the long run, kind of a blessing for me in the sense that it allowed me to negotiate the variety of reactions that were around. I mean, I had some sense of why their feelings existed on the one hand, but I also had a recognition for what was going on in my own life.

Ron: I'd like for you to say a little bit more about what went well for you with this stepmother in just a minute. I know we have people listening right now who are—you know that is a mystery to them. They're trying to figure out how to connect with their stepchildren and as in the case of your family, it's easier with one child versus another for whatever reason.

And that certainly was the case for you, in part because—and I want to point out to our listener, the struggles that your stepmom had with your two older siblings, for example, had nothing to do—well, maybe a little bit—had hardly anything to do with her—it had to do with the past and how things rolled down, the fact that they were out of the home. That wasn't orchestrated by anybody on purpose. It just was the case and so they just didn't have the amount of time that you had, for example, with her.

And so sometimes it's not your fault. I just feel like I want to say that to some stepparents. It's not your fault. You now have to deal with what is; maybe there's a natural gap there because they don't live in the home, and so it's going to move slowly. But at least it's helpful to know that you didn't necessarily do anything wrong.

Let's get back to what went right for you. You've mentioned a couple of times that sounds like she was pouring into you. She was kind of helping you navigate your teenage years.

Darrell: Yes, she was, and that was helpful and positive. I mean, it isn't—yes, I have to say it isn't as clean as you just suggested, because part of the/part of what was going on that was impacting my older siblings was that my stepmom came from a slightly poorer background, if I can say it that way, than my dad did. And so, there was an impression that one of the reasons she was drawing close to dad was because he could take care of her. And they felt—

Ron: —suspicious.

Darrell: They had questions about that. Yes, that'd be the way to say it. They had questions about that. And then, when I said earlier, I understood kind of where they were coming from, that's part of what was in that mix. But the other part of it was she was so—we were so engaged with each other in terms of the way she was stepping into my life that I didn't see it as negatively as my two older siblings did. I just didn't. And so that was that dimension of the question. I mean, it did introduce in my mind, you know a doubt, that kind of thing but it didn't/but that doubt never got to the point of being overwhelming because of the way we relate to each other.

I want to say one other thing that's pretty important here, I think, and that is the ability of the person stepping into the family to be a positive presence is, in some degree related to how welcoming the child is going to be to that parent. Our relationship was good. I was open to her and, and our relationship was good. My younger sister did the best she could, given where she was with her own conflict, but she wasn't quite as open, so it wasn't as easy between my stepmom and her.

And then with the other two, they were just, again, I said they were away so much that there wasn't much going on, but there always was this element, a little bit of element of tension in their relationship because of these questions that they had. All those dynamics are individualized.

Ron: That's right.

Darrell: There's no rule that works here other than to negotiate the individual relationships that are involved, it seems to me.

Ron: Sometimes parents and stepparents ask me questions like, “Okay, so what can we do?” The assumption is that there's some magic bullet that the adults can do that all of a sudden opens up the hearts and minds of the children in spite of whatever their age is and whatever their past has been, that circumvents all of that and all of a sudden there's this magic connection that can be made. No, the takeaway here is children are people.

Darrell: That's right.

Ron: They have strong, strong feelings and beliefs about the new marriage; about what it means, what it doesn't mean; "How does this affect my relationship with my biological mother?"—in your case, that's now deceased—and like they have strong beliefs about all of this, and they're going to be a factor in the equation.

Darrell: Yes. Even a controlling factor to some degree, because—

Ron: That's right.

Darrell: —at least in my thinking, because I'm sitting here going, it isn't—and this was the point you were making earlier that I kind of gave a caveat on. I think this is the value of your point, and that is it isn't all—the ball isn't always in the stepparent's court, okay. The ball is very much back and forth between the child and the stepparent, and the child is also dealing with stuff that impacts how the game's being played and so that is—and that's beyond the stepparent's control to some degree. The stepparent can impact how the game ends up being played out by how they react, but that stuff going on within the child is part of what is creating the dynamic and you don't always know, and sometimes the child doesn't even know—

Ron: That's right.

Darrell: —what's creating that.

Ron: Okay. That is very well said. Essentially what is on the line here is trust. I mean, you were able to trust her in part because you saw them dating. You got to observe that process, and there was some integrity to that, so you were able to kind of glean from that and you had a little bit of doubt about her—

Darrell: That's right.

Ron: —but there were some other things that were happening that was overcoming that. For example, you got time with her, so you got to develop your own relationship that stood on its own. She's pouring into you all at the same time and so you see her heart and you're thinking, "This is somebody I can trust." At the end of the day, that had more going for it in your relationship.

But your siblings, for whatever reason—circumstances out of the house, you know the shock of mom's death for your younger sister—it's a different equation. They just don't have the—it doesn't add up to the same amount of trust. In their case, it was more doubt and suspicion than it was trust and that closed the door on the relationship developing, at least initially, and over time. I'd love to hear more about how that developed in that space.

But the thing to say to the stepparent listening to all of this going, “Okay, Darrell's right, so a lot of this is in the court of the child. What am I to do in the meantime?” Well, be trustworthy even if they're not necessarily giving you that many points for being trustworthy, if I could say it that way. Trustworthiness eventually adds up to something; don't know how much; don't know how quickly that door will open to their heart. But if you're not trustworthy, then the door never opens to you, so it has to be the thing that you lead with as that stepparent who is pursuing a relationship with the child.

Darrell: Maybe this is a way to say it, and maybe you have enough experience with this to know whether this is even right. But the stepparent never replaces the biological parent, even if the biological parent is absent provided one qualification—provided the relationship with a biological parent was present enough to establish itself in the relationship of the child.

Ron: Sometimes that door opens more quickly if—unfortunately, if the biological parent had a very poor relationship with the child. But in other cases, I will say this, Darrell, that works in the opposite direction for a child who, who longed forever to have a connection with that parent, and now they seem to be even further away. Well, my longing doesn't necessarily die. I mean, I just wish they would come back, and I would finally get what I never had.

Darrell: I can imagine a situation where if you're dealing with, say, a divorce or a case where a parent/biological parent was never around, that the dynamics would be very, very different because of the absence of the parent in the house. But in a case where there was an intact family, the intact family functioned, the intact family functioned fairly functionally, if I can, [Laughter] you know, pile words on top of themselves, that stepparent is never going to replace that space that the biological parent had, and to understand that as a stepparent coming in is probably pretty important.

And then if you build the right kind of trust, you will get to a point, and maybe this is the analogy, you will get to the point where you might be like an aunt or an uncle who you like.

Ron: That's right.

Darrell: Okay, but you will never totally replace the space of that biological parent.

Ron: That is the exact language that we use here at FamilyLife Blended and in our stepfamily material. You're an extended family member who is very dear and near to the child's heart, but you never—I think that's the overarching takeaway to this conversation is you're never going to replace the biological parent living or deceased. Don't try. That's not your—that shouldn't be your objective.

Darrell: That's exactly right.

Ron: You're going to be an additional person in the life of this child. Some people are very close to their mother-in-law or their father-in-law. Some people are very close to an uncle or an aunt, and yet they have other extended family members that they're not particularly close to. It works the same way with stepfamily members. The point is grow your relationship based on what you have available today and be trustworthy so that as the door begins to open a little wider for that child, then what they experience in you is something really good.

Darrell, I want to turn the corner just a little bit. We're going to talk about your dad in a minute. I'm also mindful that you gained three stepsiblings that were your stepmother's children. How did your relationship and your siblings' relationship with them go from the beginning?

Darrell: That's going to be harder for me to summarize. My relationship with them was pretty good. I had—and she had a young, young child/a young son, the youngest of her three who was really disrupted by the disruption in her own family past because she was out of a divorce. I ended up for a while being like a big brother to this young sibling, and actually enjoyed the role, to be honest, and so worked at it. She had a middle son who was pretty normal for lack of a better description, and we just got along. And then the oldest was a daughter and that was just odd. We were good and were good with one another, but it was a situation where she was family, but she was not my sister, but she was my sister, you know?

Ron: That's right.

Darrell: And that was just confusing for me.

Ron: Yes.

Darrell: Really, she's the only one of the three that I've had some contact with down the road; in part, because we are/we both have come to faith since, and she ends up working at a place that's across the street from where our extension is in Houston. That's a real coincidence. Those relationships all had to be individually negotiated as well and were. They were very, very different because of, again, where these/her siblings were in their own life with their own experience in processing not only what was happening in the larger family from their perspective, but what was happening between us as a result.

Ron: Looking back, how did your dad take all this family adjustment: new wife, new family, and how the kids reacted? And I'm wondering, how did it impact your dad and stepmom's marriage?

Darrell: I don't know if I know that answer to that entirely, but I would say—you know he was having—he was well aware of how everybody was reacting. There was no doubt

about that, but he was doing his best to manage that. But remember, he was a—I've got to say this—a half absentee dad who was very—traveling a lot, that kind of thing. There was an element of day to day in this that didn't exist because of the way his own life was being managed and where the older/my older siblings were. They were involved in their own life, in their own locations and so it would pop up, I guess. I guess the analogy is it's like, what's that game where you've got the things that pop up and—

Ron: Whack-a-Mole? [Laughter]

Darrell: Whack-a-Mole, it would/it was a little bit like Whack-a-Mole, you know? It would show up when everybody was together, maybe a little bit, but then it would go away. I know it impacted their relationship to the degree that my stepmom was very aware that her relationship with my older siblings wasn't what it was, say with me, or even to some degree with my younger sister who eventually did adjust, I think, to the new reality. It still was something hard for him to process, but he also was very distracted with the fact that he ran a business that put him out on the road so much and was international and the amount of travel that he was doing.

He eventually/they eventually located and lived in Bermuda. I was in Houston with my sister and he and my stepmom, Margaret, were—we call her Margaret—they were in Bermuda, which was nice for me during spring break because I got to go to Bermuda. Everything was kind of dislocated; it wasn't a single household under a single roof. And that obviously was a very important dynamic to the whole thing, and it allowed, probably allowed them to function as a couple without the distraction of the variety of responses they were getting, at least to a degree.

Ron: Wow. So, jump five years into the new blended family, ten years in, up to today. I mean, what was the journey five years in? How did it change? How did it evolve? What eventually happened? You're now out of the house, you know your older two siblings were always out of the house, essentially, dad and stepmom eventually are going to move to Bermuda, so how did that impact the evolution of the home over time?

Darrell: Well, what happened, of course, was that—and this is because the story doesn't have a long ending. My dad passed away of a heart attack when I was 21. They hadn't been married—I don't remember the exact link, but they certainly hadn't been married very, very long—you know a few years at best. My older brother, who had become a lawyer and is a lawyer, was the one who—he died of a heart attack in London as part of, he was traveling. It was my older brother who was a lawyer who went to take care of wrapping everything that's required when that kind of an event/sudden event happens.

Then we were dropped into negotiations given the will with the remainder of the family situation in which he as a lawyer, and to some degree was negotiating on behalf of all of us with this stepmom with whom his relationship wasn't necessarily the best. He was doing the best he could to try and manage being a lawyer, looking after our interests

and dealing with the way he was feeling about this relationship on the other. That was just a challenge is the only way to say it.

Ron: Absolutely.

Darrell: It was very, very hard because one of the things that resulted from the will that my dad wrote was that he divided things pretty equally and that didn't sit well with some of my siblings.

Ron: I have to just throw this in there. Shameless plug—our book, *The Smart Stepfamily Guide to Financial Planning* outlines this very thing as a big reason why blended families need to have an estate plan. They need to have it in writing and need to have communicated it to the children—young, old, whatever the case may be—so that there are no surprises—so you don't get to a funeral and people are fighting over the estate. That's something I want to suggest to people. That couldn't have helped the relationships at that point.

Darrell: No, no. It was very counterproductive in many ways. I will say this, that I think everybody given those realities did the best they could with what they were facing. You know we never devolved into an absolute kind of total separation and that kind of thing. That was a challenging period for everybody because that was challenging people's sense of allegiances all over the place.

Ron: Absolutely. Right. Those really had not come together. I'm curious, were there any ripples to that whole funeral estate debacle?

Darrell: Well, we eventually worked it all out. It just took a long time.

Ron: Your relationship with your stepmom specifically, I'm wondering if there was any damage to that?

Darrell: Not really because by that time I was in college and was towards the end of my time at the University of Texas and getting ready to transition into going to seminary. I had come to the Lord in the midst of college, et cetera. So that worked out, I think, reasonably well. The challenges were more about just getting, trying to get through in somewhat a coherent way as a total family, all the pressure that those negotiations put on everybody. And with my brother, very, I think responsibly, dealing with the position he had been put in as a result and doing the best he could. Even in some ways, despite some of his feelings, to do the best for everybody that he could.

So that, like I said, that was a challenging time, but we got through it and the result was just to do the longer term is, is that basically the family broke—the family as it was, to the extent that it was almost totally broke apart. I mean, in the sense of I didn't see my stepmom very much more after that; same true with the three, her three children, that kind of thing. We kept in touch for a little bit, and then it kind of all just dissolved.

Ron: Do you miss your dad?

Darrell: I miss my dad tremendously. He and I were extremely close. We could be extremely frank with one another. I wrote him a letter at one point, really close to the time when he had his heart attack—probably one of the last meaningful conversations I had with him because of his travel—complaining about the fact that I had been put in this position of being a dad and a brother to my sister, and that it wasn't fair and that he really needed to own up to being her dad. He took that well. I mean, our relationship was such that we could speak up.

And just to show you just kind of the quality of this, my dad and my mom came out of a Jewish background. They left Judaism before I was born so for me to go into Christian ministry on the other end of my story, and for them—well not my mom never knew—but for my dad to understand that's where I was going and why, and why I wanted to serve people, et cetera and I thought that was an effective way to do it, he got that. That kind of shows you the quality of the relationship I had with my dad. So yes, I miss my dad.

I miss my mom in a completely different way because I really, I never got to say to her, what had I known she was dying, I would've wanted to say, which is, I know I was a pain in the neck for you growing up, but I love you very, very much. And I appreciate the way you tried to care for me, even in the midst of having to go through what you had to go through. I never got the chance to say that to my mom and should I see her in heaven, that will be the first thing I will say to her.

Ron: How about your stepmom; do you miss her?

Darrell: Ms. Hershey's passed away now. Yes, I think there was a time when I missed her. There's another element of that that was—you know she had her role in my dad's life. She certainly had a role in my life, but I don't—it's not the same as with my biological mom. It's just not.

Ron: Right.

Darrell: I appreciated how she helped me through what were very challenging teenage years in many ways, but it was more, like I said, the analogy is she's more like a relative that you confide in than someone who you think of as being in your inner family. The beauty of what she did with me was she accepted that space and understood it, I think. We never talked about it, but that's the sense—but I really, I really felt like at times, at certain points in my life, I could tell her what was going on with my life and she would process it with my best interests in mind.

Ron: You know it sounds, Darrell, like she got that and understood her place and that's what freed you up to like her.

Darrell: It could be. I mean, it was, like I say, I was in/I was open to it. So that certainly helped, but she reciprocated, I think is actually what you're saying. And she reciprocated in a way in which she wasn't aspiring to be something she could never be.

Ron: That's right, and that makes a world of difference right there. That's the wisdom that I would want stepparents listening to. There's your takeaway: pace with the children; meet them where they are. If some/if they're open to you, great, walk through that door. If the door is shut, stand gently outside and knock and wait and be patient. Don't assume too much about your role in their life. When you embrace that and they see that you embrace it—you're not trying to get rid of mom, for example, in Darrell's heart—then, all of a sudden, you just become a safer person to invest in. And that goes a long way towards keeping that door open.

Is there anything, looking back at that whole journey for you, is there anything we haven't talked about?

Darrell: If you recognize kind of who's court the ball is in and you allow the game to be played in light of where young people's hearts are, who are trying to process many things in terms of where they are in their life, and you be the adult in that and not the controlling parent, necessarily, you put yourself in a better position to actually get somewhere.

I think that's what I'm saying. Because I think some, in some blended families, my guess would be that trouble comes when the new member in the family steps in and says, "Okay, I'm the mom," or "I'm the dad now." There's some of that that has to be because there's a parent and child, but that can't be negotiated out, I think in the same way as if you were their biological parent.

Ron: Yes.

Darrell: I think realizing that is important. In some cases, if the parental relationship is good, the hard work of being the biological parent rests [inaudible] biological parent in the pair, if that makes sense?

Ron: It does.

Darrell: Sometimes, just because the way personalities are, they don't—the biological parent won't take that responsibility and leaves it to the new one and you're/you can be playing with fire.

Ron: Okay. Last question. This is a stretch; I don't know. You think biblically a lot, day in and day out, that's your academic world, professional life. Is there a theological or biblical concept that you kind of wish blended families understood that if they applied it to their family, this would really help?

Darrell: Yes, it's a simple idea. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your child as yourself. Love your new children as yourself, and just think about—don't think about so much about where you are as thinking about where they are and love them accordingly.

Ron: Darrell, thanks for being with me today. I appreciate it very much. If you the listener, want to know more about him and his work and his ministry, please check out the show notes. If you'd like to leave us a question for a future episode, you can do that as well. And if this discussion has you wanting to learn more about the inner experience of children, I'm going to highly recommend Lauren Ritsema's book to you, *In Their Shoes*. It helps parents and stepparents see kids more clearly, see life from their vantage point, and parent more compassionately because of that perspective. That's the book *In Their Shoes*.

If you haven't subscribed to this podcast, let me encourage you to do that right now. We don't want you to miss anything. Plus, you can go back and listen to all the other Growing Up Blended episodes that we've done, as well as other topics. There's over a hundred episodes in our series at this point; lots to feed your heart and mind and family. And if this podcast has served you, let me just ask you to maybe do a couple of things. Share it with a friend; help somebody else out. That would be great.

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And by all means, please, please, please join us either live in Melbourne, Florida for *Blended and Blessed*, or virtually on your smartphone or laptop for this worldwide livestream, Saturday, April 29th, *Blended and Blessed*. Again, the show notes will tell you how you can be a part of that.

Okay, next time I'm going to be talking with Scott and Vanessa Martindale about how to manage and survive the fiery furnace of custody litigation. That is a hard, hard road to walk. Many of you have been through that. Unfortunately, many of you will have to go through. Let's spend some time talking about it. That's next time on *FamilyLife Blended*.

I'm Ron Deal. Thanks for joining us. *FamilyLife Blended* is produced by Marcus Holt and Josh Batson. Our mastering engineer is Jarett Roskey. Our project coordinator is Ann Ancarrow and theme music composed and performed by Braden Deal.

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