

Christmas, 2001

Dear Friends,

What a joy it has been to see God bring together both the calling that Susy and I and the family have had to win and disciple people, and the relationships with people we have known and ministered with over many years, to form early this year, Discipleship Network of America (DNA). God has deepened and expanded what He is doing in amazing ways.

I am writing this letter upon my return from being with a CBMC group in South Carolina, where once again I saw a small band of men faithfully carrying out our Lord's ministry, with Him bringing incredible and lasting fruit. One Indian businessman of Hindu background invited by his CBMC customer was included in the 25 who prayed to receive Christ, and at an evening meeting with couples, we discussed the need for godly and consistent discipline of our children, leading to a greater vision and focus on His Word and His work.

Many of you have heard my testimony of how God took this angry, hurting, self-centered man who crushed my precious wife's heart, and in turn broke my heart for Him. You may recall that part of my coming to understand how Jesus died in my place for all the sinful things I had done in my life, was remembering that dark day when John Atkinson, whose wife was expecting their first child, had died in my place in Viet Nam. Three days before that fateful November 7th day, we had both been promoted and he took over my machine gun. The Viet Cong always went for the gunner. Three days before it would have been me.

It was my great privilege to share this story of how Christ changed my life on Focus on the Family, November 8 and 9 to over 200 million people worldwide. We were grateful that Focus not only left in my full explanation of the gospel, but the prayer at the end to pray to receive Christ. We are praying that many thousands responded to God's offer of salvation, and will continue to do so as the tape is circulated. You may know someone who would benefit from hearing the gospel through this tape, especially in light of the fear and anxiety caused by the 9/11 tragedy. If this tape would be helpful, you may order it from Focus on the Family (1 800 232-6459).

Of the many calls and emails we received as a result of the Focus broadcast, one absolutely brought me to tears. Over the many years I have shared my story around the world, I have always used John Atkinson's name, hoping one day his son or daughter would come up to me so that I could tell him or her what a wonderful man John was. On November 9, thirty-four years and two days after John died, his daughter Johnnielynn called me after hearing the program, joy mixed with pain, anxious to know about the father she never knew.

As we have received letters and emails from participants in fourteen outreach meetings in the last nine months (we have spoken either together or individually to 4470 people with 988 indicating they prayed to receive Christ), we have been struck anew with the power of God to change men and women's hearts. What a privilege it is to serve such a great God! At one of those meetings, a man brought his two brother-in-laws who consistently refused to go to "religious meetings". They were not only touched by the message, but also were shocked to see one of their former drug dealers also bringing guests.

Although I continue to do most of the speaking and teaching around the country for DNA, one of my greatest joys this year has been when Susy and I have done couples conferences, or the family has spoken together. During the last week of August, the family spoke 16 times at Maranatha Bible Conference that has been made into five new video series which will be available soon, on a number of diverse subjects including *Tangling with Teens*, *Men Only – Purity, Sexuality to Accountability – 8 to 18*, *Building Character and Godliness in Your Children*, and *Turning Your Family Into A Discipleship Team*. A scientist commented that the conference had been "a wake-up call with regard to my family interaction responsibilities. I have always been very strong in my own relationship with Jesus and in discipling others, but after seeing your example, I have purposed to bring it home as I should have all along. I guess I thought it would just naturally take place, but it wasn't and I needed to become much more intentional about it."

God used Susy to encourage many moms to seek God through those overwhelming moments when it is difficult to see any progress in the training and raising of our children. Paul led the session on *Finding Victory in the Dating Dilemma*, and also talked about how he has continued discipleship relationships in college. Matthew, Paul, Joshua and I spoke on maintaining purity including how father/son relationships can grow into the deepest of accountability for men seeking to be a one-woman man. Anna, Matthew and Joshua recently received a letter thanking them for the transparent sharing and teaching they all did that week. The teen said that before the conference she had not been speaking to her former best friend for months because of a misunderstanding, and that Joshua's comments on what God had taught him about gossip, had caused them both to confess to one another and reconcile.

God has used our perspective of our family being not only the first teaching team, but also the first discipleship team, to put together a series of messages for various homeschool groups this year in California, Illinois, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, Michigan and New England. These include *The Keys to Godly Discipline*, *Teaching your Children to Love God's Word*, and *Successful and Fruitful Homeschooling*. In the California conference, one father said that hearing Joshua share the value of consistent discipline and talking about the Lord on scheduled weekly dates between parent and child, gave him new vision for his family. Of course we thread the theme and importance of discipleship through every talk we give, and one mom commented, "I am embarrassed to say I never saw the connection between homeschooling and discipleship!"

There is so much happening in the world in the negative, that people have received with enthusiasm God's outline for changing the world through discipleship. Dr. Gene Getz who attended our *Eternal Impact Weekend* as a participant said, "What a great experience! Phil's down-to-earth stories, personal vulnerability, Biblical content and practical applications have touched us all!" God has opened up opportunities to do both men's and couples' *Eternal Impact Weekends* around the country and in Canada this next year. "Your message on lifetime discipleship is what I want every pastor in our denomination to hear at our national conference" were the words of the director of men's ministry of a large evangelical denomination. Another pastor said, "Your plan of the pastors, elders, and deacons, going through the book *Eternal Impact* and each one committing to disciple one-on-one another man, is not only Biblical, but a great strategy to both double the leadership of our church and also accomplish Jesus' command to make disciples." We take absolutely no credit for all God has been doing through us and DNA this year. To God be all the glory. What a privilege it is to serve Him!

We have been impressed anew this year with the hard work and many hours required for one-on-one discipleship. Our Timothies are going through marriage struggles, job losses, health crises and fear of the future, but what a privilege to walk with people committed to grow in Him through their challenges. One of the men I meet with said recently, "I hate my teenage daughter and I need God's help." But as we try to model Paul's life of meeting with people not by sharing our victories, but as a nurturing, transparent, prayerful, gentle, spiritual parent (I Thess. 1:7), sharing our struggles and our challenges, we will see fruit that God can use to change the world. Jesus wants not only our sweat, but also our very soul, and making disciples is imparting "not only the gospel, but also our own lives" (I Thess. 2:8). Lifetime discipleship results in family and community and business change through true Biblical "life change." In the words of a friend, "Our discipleship meetings have been my anchor, my rest, and have provided the solutions to my dilemmas."

Abigail is a junior at Covenant College and is enjoying living in the dorm, but misses the daily interaction with the family. Although away from home (just 35 minutes), she regularly initiates outings with her brothers and sisters and comes home for family dinners. Susanna stayed with her at school for several days this fall and delighted Abigail's roommates with a treasure hunt with colored rocks and crocheted art as prizes. Abigail is an officer of the Rotaract Business Club and was thrilled to accept an offer from Arthur Andersen for a tax internship next summer here in their Chattanooga office. She continues to express her love and concern for people in a multitude of ways.

Paul is thrilled with his first semester at Bryan College where he is studying business. He has found an incredibly godly and fun circle of friends and caring and discipleship-hearted professors. Though the semester has been full of challenges and hard work, Paul has greatly enjoyed both the subjects he is studying and the stimulating

discussions that are the fruit of an excellent college community. He has continued his focus on discipleship and since he is commuting from home, he is still able to attend the Monday men's Bible study and prayer breakfast I prepare for 14 to 18 men, including Matthew and Joshua.

Matthew is enjoying his junior year in high school to the utmost. His mock trial team of six homeschoolers including Joshua and Anna, won the "Blue Tornado" competition last Saturday against nine other area high school teams. More gratifying to Susy and me than the victory, was the appreciation expressed from members of some of the other homeschool teams who told us how much Matthew and Joshua had helped them prepare for the competition. At Matthew's first session of Youth Leadership Chattanooga, he was appointed Mayor for the morning and given the task of guiding the group into balancing the city budget, which had a \$16 million deficit. After much wrangling between interest groups, the goal was accomplished, though the much-loved zoo bear exhibit had to be sacrificed! At Matthew's induction onto the Chattanooga Youth City Council in October, we had the privilege of sharing the gospel with one of our local judges. Matthew is also co-leading the community outreach group of junior and senior homeschoolers.

Anna shed her reputation of timidity in front of large crowds at a young person's conference where she gave insightful answers to the tough questions asked by the teens about relationships and following God. She continues to love piano as her pieces advance in difficulty. She shares the same passion for mock trial as her brothers, sparkling as a witness on both the plaintiff's and defendant's sides of the case. She takes her role as a discipler of Susanna very seriously as they talk nightly about the deep things of life.

Joshua's legal skills were of immense help to Matthew in training their mock trial team this year. He is enjoying his guitar tremendously, but probably gets the most joy from his fantasy football team in a league with his uncles and cousins. Joshua's love for politics and thirst for the latest news, keeps us all up-to-date on the nuances of world events.

Susanna, who still loves to snuggle and read with Susy, continues to be the heart of the family. Due to Susy's and my allergies, her beloved new kitten Daisy is not allowed in the house. We make an exception, however, on very cold days for Susanna to bring Daisy into her fort in the Bird Bath closet where she has made quite a little home for them both. Susanna has a deep love for the Lord and told her Mom recently that she felt the Lord was telling her He had something very important for her to do with her life for Him. She stocks her "store" with her new needle creations and other crafts and is especially excited about her new secret fort she and I are making in the backyard.

Susy continues to enjoy homeschooling (two down, four to go!). She thrives on the challenge of balancing the homeschooling with her many hours of work on DNA, being available for late night chats with our two college kids, working on both our books in process and our new website currently under construction (DNAMinistries.org), and involvement with our Monday night couples' study, our small group, and our Family Matters young couples class at church. She and I have never been closer to each other and the Lord.

We have noticed, as you probably have, such an openness in people who are asking questions, some for the first time in their lives, about where God is and what will become of them in the future. With the fear of this year, has come the great hope in knowing that truly our Lord through His Son Jesus Christ has provided the Way, the Truth and the Life to all who seek Him.

We would love to hear from you and would greatly appreciate your returning the enclosed card with your email address. If you would like us to speak or teach at your men's, couples', or family retreat or conference, church or homeschool meeting, or curriculum fair, please indicate that also on the card. Or feel free to email us at PhilDowner@DNAMinistries.org. We covet your prayers. Have a blessed Christmas!

Phil, Susy, Abigail, Paul, Matthew, Anna, Joshua, and Susanna

QUOTEABLE QUOTES

FORGETFUL FRIENDS – Assuring Susy that Matthew and I would remember to drop off her dress at the cleaners we passed, we were frustrated once again in the midst of an engaging conversation which diverted these two members of the male species from our point of mission. But the solution was reached when Matthew exclaimed, "I've got it. Why don't we flip for which one of us will wear the dress back to the cleaners as a compelling reminder not to inadvertently pass by again!"

DRIVER OF THE YEAR AWARD GOES TO AN UNNAMED FRIEND – (You know who you are!) For driving me to a conference to speak in congested freeway traffic, madly punching buttons demonstrating his new Global Positioning System with his right hand, shaving with his battery operated razor with his left hand, and steering the car with his knee on the steering wheel!

OUR ENTREPRENEUR – Having read to Susy the Genesis account of the Fall, Susanna asked if the Garden of Eden was still there. Susy said, "No, there would be no need for it." Susanna's retort, "It sure would be great for tourists!"

HEIGHTENED SECURITY FOILED – Checking in at our home airport, Dad was surprised by two laughing agents at the counter who said, "We know you. You are the father of the 14 year-old who showed us his own personalized baseball card as his photo ID!"

A NEW APPROACH – Joshua shocked Dad at a conference with his new, unrehearsed and certainly uncritiqued starting line of his talk on discipleship, "If you want to find a Timothy, look around in your life for who is a real pain in the neck." As I was looking for the "big hook" or trap door button, Joshua turned his starting teaser into a great illustration of the many times God will show you that the person who is irritating you is really calling for help and has needs that God may want you to meet in discipleship.

ANY VOLUNTEERS? – Having spent ten minutes explaining to Susanna why the time changes after you pass a time zone's imaginary line, Susy said, "Anything else?" Susanna's response, "Yes, the stock market."