

WHYZMEN · REWIRE RETIREMENT

Wise Men Seek, Knowing Their Why's

APPENDIX K

The Ethical Will

An Expanded Addendum to My Harvest Charter

“When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons ... he was gathered to his people.” — Genesis 49:33

Navigating Transition · Building Brotherhood · Igniting Jubilee

An Ancient Practice You Are Stepping Into

You are about to do something men have done for more than three thousand years. The ethical will is not a modern self-help exercise. It has a name — in Hebrew, the *tzava'ah* — and a lineage that runs straight through Scripture. When Jacob gathered his twelve sons around his bed to bless each one and name what he saw in them, he was writing an ethical will. So was Moses in his final song over the tribes, and David charging Solomon, and Paul writing to Timothy from a Roman cell, and Jesus himself in the upper room on the last night.

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” — 2 Timothy 4:7

A legal will distributes what you owned. An ethical will distributes what you learned. One settles your estate; the other settles your story. Both matter — but only one of them tells your grandchildren who you were, what you believed, and what you hoped they would carry forward when you are no longer in the room.

The Power to Bless

At the heart of this tradition is the blessing — the *berakhah* a father speaks over the next generation. Isaac blessed Jacob; Jacob crossed his hands over his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh and blessed them too. Gary Smalley and John Trent, in their book *The Blessing*, describe what a true blessing contains: meaningful presence, a spoken message, attaching high value to the person, picturing a special future for them, and an active commitment to help it come to pass.

Many men were never blessed this way by their own fathers. The ethical will is your chance to break that silence — to give what you may never have received. That is holy work, and it is the most important thing in this document.

A Word of Permission

Most men carry quiet scripts into a task like this: don't be too emotional, only talk about the wins, get it perfect or don't bother. Set those down. An ethical will asks for something different:

- **Honesty over polish.** This is not a press release. It is a series of letters from your deepest, wisest self to the people you love.
- **Stories over theories.** “Let me tell you about a time...” will always land deeper than abstract advice.
- **Humility over perfection.** Your regrets and mistakes belong here. They are often the most useful thing you can give.
- **Blessing over control.** You are not telling them how to live. You are offering what you have learned and what you hope for them.

“All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.” — Ernest Hemingway

Let that be your floor and your permission. One true sentence under each heading is already a complete ethical will. Everything beyond that is a gift, not a requirement.

How to Write Yours

1. **Choose your format.** Write it — a Word file, a notebook, printed letters. Or record short spoken pieces by topic. Most men do best with a written core plus a few recorded stories in their own voice.
2. **Start small and modular.** Don’t attempt one perfect document. Work one Movement at a time, one page or one story per sitting. Think in chapters and letters, not a book.
3. **Harvest what you have already mined.** You do not start from a blank page. Pull your values forward from your Values Compass, your redemptive story from Read My Story, your strengths from your Strengths Portrait. The ethical will is where you pour the blade you have already forged across this program.
4. **Write to one person.** Even when the words are for everyone, picture one specific grandchild as you write. It softens the tone and sharpens the truth.
5. **Keep it living.** Date your entries. Revisit them every year or two. Add new stories; revise what no longer feels true. Tell your family plainly: this is my best attempt to share what I have seen so far — not the last word.
6. **Decide who it is for, and when.** Write a primary version for your children and grandchildren, knowing others may one day read it. Then decide: many men find the greatest gift is to share parts of it now, while they can watch it be received, rather than leaving it sealed until they are gone.

The Seven Movements

These seven movements are your spine. You do not need all of them, and you can take them in any order. Under each, you will find a few prompts and room to begin. Remember the floor: one true sentence is enough to start.

Movement 1 • Where I Came From

Roots, family, and the world that shaped you.

“Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past.” — Deuteronomy 32:7

- *Here is the world I was born into...*

- *Growing up, what mattered most in our family was...*

- *The people and places that shaped me — for better and worse — were...*

Movement 2 · What I Have Come to Believe

Your credo — what you would stake your life on.

“As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” — Joshua 24:15

- *If I had to put my faith into a few sentences, here is what I believe about God...*

- *These are the convictions I would stake my life on...*

- *What I have learned about suffering, hope, and what holds when everything else gives way...*

Movement 3 · What I've Learned

Hard-won lessons across work, money, marriage, and faith.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” — Proverbs 9:10

- *Three values I've tried to live by — even imperfectly — are...*

- *What I learned about work and purpose that I wish I'd known sooner...*

- *What I learned about love, money, and what really lasts...*

Movement 4 · Where I Fell Short

Confession, regret, and forgiveness — asked and given.

“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” — Psalm 103:12

- *One of my biggest mistakes was... and what I hope you take from it is...*

- *If there is anyone I need to ask forgiveness from, it is...*

- *And here is the forgiveness I want to offer, freely and without conditions...*

Movement 5 · Stories I Want Carried

“I Was Once Your Age” — the moments that reveal who you are.

“We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD.” — Psalm 78:4

- *Let me tell you about a time I was afraid and did it anyway...*

- *A turning point for me was...*

- *I was once your age, and here is a story I want you to have...*

Movement 6 · My Blessing Over You

The berakhah — direct, named, and spoken.

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you.” —

Numbers 6:24–25

- *What I most hope for you is...*

- *When you doubt yourself, remember this about who you are...*

- *Even if we disagree on things that matter, here is what I want you to know about my love for you...*

Movement 7 • How I Think About the End

Life, death, and hope. (Optional — but often the most treasured.)

“Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation.” — Psalm 71:18

- *Here is how I have come to think about life and death...*

- *When my time comes, I hope you will remember...*

- *Being your father, grandfather, and friend has meant...*

A Worked Example

To show how little it takes, here is one man's entry under Movement 6 — a blessing for his granddaughter. It is six sentences. It is enough.

Dear Ellie,

You came into a noisy family and you have been the quiet that steadies all of us. I have watched you give your time to people the rest of the world walks past, and I want you to know that I saw it. That is your gift, and it is from God. My hope for you is not that life goes easy — it won't — but that you keep that soft, fierce heart no matter who tells you to harden it. When you doubt yourself, remember that your grandfather, who was not an easy man to impress, was undone by your kindness. And I will be cheering you on, whether or not I am still in the room to do it.

— *Grandpa*

Before You Set It Down

An ethical will is never truly finished until you are. When you have a draft you can live with, do three things:

1. **Tell them what it is.** Let your family know this is a living document — your best attempt at the truth so far, not a verdict or a set of orders.
2. **Decide how it is given.** Sealed for later, or read aloud over a meal while you are still here to see their faces? There is no wrong answer, but the men who share it now rarely regret it.
3. **Return to it.** Bring it back to your triad. Reread it on your birthday. Add the story you forgot. The harvest keeps coming in.

“At the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” — Galatians 6:9

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