



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
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“Will Our Children Know the LORD?”
Judges 2:6-10; 2 Timothy 1:3-5

It's amazing what children know these days, isn't it?

Through the years, my wife Jo Ann has taught at every grade level from fifth through eighth grade, and now for the past four years, third grade. A lot of what those kids have to learn today are things that I didn't learn much about until high school.

And you know, of course, that if you have a problem figuring out your computer or your VCR or DVD player or cell phone or just about any other electronic device, your child or grandchild can often help you immediately!

Unfortunately, kids today also often know a lot more about some other things that we wish they didn't know about. Many fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders—and sometimes even second- or third-graders—are exposed to or even involved in things my generation and those before mine never had to face, or at least not until they were much older.

At the same time, I'm often amazed at just how little children, youth, and even young adults today sometimes know things that we knew well back then—particularly about the Bible and the Christian life and the church.

Back in 1995-1996 and then again in 2008 I had the pleasure of being an adjunct instructor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Campbell University, teaching a section of the introductory religion class that every student has to take. I don't think I'll ever forget how those young people's eyes would light up as I shared with them the stories of the Bible—stories I had known since I was a kid. But for many of them, including most of those who had grown up in Sunday School and church, it was as though this was the first time they had ever heard them!

Next week, our children in the public elementary and middle schools will take their “end-of-grade” tests. This is a stressful time for students, parents, and teachers, especially for those in the “gateway” grades, where no matter how well a student has done in the classroom, he or she has to pass this test to move up to the next grade. In a few weeks, our public high school students will take their final exams. Some subjects have a state “end-of-course” test. And for some students, graduation may be riding on the results of their finals or their EOCs.

Of course, the stated purpose of these tests is to find out what our children know, or don't know. Their education is vitally important, and you won't find anyone who believes in its importance any more than I do.

But there's a burning question that we often pay little attention to, even though it's even more important than what our children and youth learn in school. It's simply this: ***Will our children know the LORD?***

Ignorance in Israel

They ignored this burning question in Israel, and the result came back to burn them!
Go back in your mind more than three millennia.

The nation of Israel had descended from Abraham and Sarah through their son Isaac, his and Rebekah's son Jacob, and the twelve sons of Jacob. They had spent over 400 years in Egypt, a good bit of that in bondage. The LORD had heard their cry for deliverance and sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt and into the land he had promised to Abraham and his descendants—the land of Canaan. We call that the Exodus.

Because they refused to trust God to give them the land when they had the opportunity to enter it shortly after the Exodus, he declared that they would wander in the wilderness for forty years—until the men of that generation had all died except Joshua and Caleb, the two of the twelve spies Moses had sent into the land who encouraged the people to go ahead and enter the land and take it.

Moses died shortly before the Israelites entered Canaan because he had disobeyed God in a way that took glory to himself rather than honoring God's glory. Before his death, Moses commissioned Joshua to lead the people into the land. And he did, following the battle plan God gave to him, and taking overall control of the land in a relatively short time, though pockets of resistance remained in different spots—similar to the way things have been in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years.

After Joshua had given the tribes of Israel their inheritance in the land, he dismissed them to go take possession of their inheritance. And as long as Joshua lived, the people who had seen all these great things that the LORD had done for Israel served the LORD faithfully. In fact, they continued to serve him as long as the elders who had outlived Joshua were still alive.

But then something ominous happened. As Judges 2:10 puts it: “another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD, nor what he had done for Israel.”¹

How in the world had that happened?

It really isn't that hard to figure it out, is it?

Israelite families and the faith community failed to nurture their children in knowing God and following his ways.

In the Hebrew faith, the primary responsibility for the religious education of the children lay with *the parents*. Think about the commandment in Deuteronomy 6:4-9—

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God,
the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God
with all your heart and with all your soul and
with all your strength. These commandments
that I give to you today are to be upon your
hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk
about them when you sit at home and when
you walk along the road, when you lie down
and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on
your hands and bind them on your foreheads.
Write them on the doorframes of your houses
and on your gates.

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

The intention was that they would so saturate themselves and their surroundings with love for the LORD and his commandments that their children would be steeped in the faith. And it was to happen in the home!

But it hadn't happened that way. And what was more, for whatever reason or reasons, the faith community had failed as well. Whether it was that the parents were not involving their children in corporate worship in appropriate ways or that the priests were not being faithful in their duties, somehow the message of their faith was failing to be passed on.

And now this new generation who didn't know God or what he had done for Israel forsook him and went after the pagan gods and goddesses of the peoples around them. They did evil in his sight. They were unfaithful to God's covenant with them. And it led to judgment on them—a judgment within history that was designed to turn them back to God. And the rest of the book of Judges is an account of this ongoing cycle of God's deliverance followed by the people's apostasy and rebellion followed by judgment followed by repentance followed by God's deliverance. And the cycle went on and on and on!

Doing it right

Now fast forward a little more than a millennium from that time.

As Paul wrote to his son-in-the-ministry Timothy, he began by thanking God for him and he remembered his sincere faith. Paul recognized that this faith had first lived in Timothy's grandmother Lois and then in his mother Eunice.

According to Acts 16:1, Timothy's mother, whom Paul identifies in 2 Timothy 1:5 as Eunice, was a Jew who was also a believer, while his father was a Greek, with no indication that he was a believer. Yet even in that mixed marriage, Eunice had successfully passed on her faith to her son, just as her mother had passed it on to her.

How had that happened?

Later in this letter (3:15), Paul says that Timothy had known the holy Scriptures from early childhood—Scriptures that were “able to make [him] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Someone—probably his mother Eunice—had taught him the Scriptures from the time he was a little boy. Likewise, Lois and Eunice had given Timothy an example of faith, and that teaching and example had been reinforced by the faith community—the churches in Lystra and Iconium (Acts 16:1).

Together, they had done it right!

So what about today . . . ?

And so, now fast forward two more millennia to today. The question is still here: Will *our* children know the Lord?

It's one of the most important questions we can ask. And ultimately, that responsibility lies with each of our children. They must each make their own choices and their own commitments. And sadly, sometimes no matter how well we teach them or how hard we try to guide them in the right way, some will still choose not to know the Lord, or to ignore him or rebel against him for a long time before they finally do come to know him and serve him.

But there are some things we can do to help, *if we will*.

So let me ask you today on this Mother's Day, when we celebrate in particular the role that mothers fulfill in our families . . .

As families, will we . . .

- Model knowing God and trusting him in our homes?
- Actively teach the Christian faith and what it means to trust in Christ and live as his disciples in our homes?
- Be actively involved in church regularly and faithfully as a family, being even more committed and more serious about our involvement and attendance and support than we are about our children's involvement in school, sports, music, scouts, and other activities?

It never has ceased to amaze me how parents will pour themselves into these other areas so diligently for their children, and yet will be so haphazard in helping their children learn about the faith and come to know the Lord and what he has done for us in Christ!

Remember, from a Biblical perspective, parents have the primary responsibility in faith formation and nurture! And remember that parents can quickly overshadow or even undo in just a few minutes what the community of faith teaches and can do in the few hours we get the children during a week's time!

Friends, don't ever underestimate the power or importance of the parental role!

Sociologist and Baptist preacher Tony Campolo says that when his wife, Peggy, was at home full-time with their children and someone would ask, "And what is it that you do, my dear?" she would respond, "I am socializing two *Homo Sapiens* into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation." Then Peggy would ask the other person, "And what do you do?"²

The role of parents is *crucial* and *primary* in spiritual formation. But as the family of faith, we as a church also have responsibility for the children God has brought in our midst. So as a congregation, will we . . .

- Provide proper nurture and spiritual formation for our children and youth?
- Teach the Christian faith and lifestyle by both our word and example?
- Create a climate in our congregation that prepares the way for children and youth to put their faith in Christ and hear God's call on their lives?

Will our children know the Lord? After Joshua's generation died, theirs didn't. And yet Timothy did.

What was the difference? What will make the difference with *our* children? What will it take?

Simply this: *By instruction and example, we must help our children know the Lord and what he has done for us in Christ!* As we do, God will use it in their lives. And while they must make their own choices, this will prepare the way for them to choose the Lord Jesus Christ and his way.

Will you commit yourself to this today?

² John Ortberg and Ruth Haley, *An Ordinary Day with Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 122. Cited on preachingtoday.com.

O Lord, may church and home combine
To teach Thy perfect way,
With gentleness and love like Thine,
That none shall ever stray.

Shine, Light divine; reveal Thy face
Where darkness else might be.
Grant, Love divine, in every place
Glad fellowship with Thee.

May steadfast faith and earnest prayer
Keep sacred vows secure;
Build Thou a hallowed dwelling where
True joy and peace endure.³

†MEG

³ Carlton C. Buck, "O Lord, May Church and Home Combine," *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991), 510.