

# Beyond Noah's Ark

BY SUSAN R. GARRETT

We want to tell our children the ancient stories of promise, deliverance, human failure, and divine forgiveness and fidelity so that they, too, may come to “love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and strength.” But just how do we go about imparting to them a deep knowledge of Scripture?

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*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

*Deuteronomy 6:4-9*

**A**fter Moses delivered the Ten Commandments, he instructed the people on how to live in devotion to the Lord. Above all they must love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and strength. They must keep the commandments and *teach them to their children*. And when the children ask, in future years, about the meaning of the decrees and statutes and ordinances, then the people must tell their children the story of the Exodus: “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...” (Deuteronomy 6:21).

As Christian parents, grandparents, and caregivers, we too want to teach the holy words to our children. We want to tell them the ancient stories of promise, deliverance, human failure, and divine forgiveness and fidelity so that they, too, may come to “love the Lord with all their heart,

soul, and strength." But just *how* do we go about imparting to them a deep knowledge of Scripture? The temptation is to leave this task to "the experts" at Sunday school or a week of vacation Bible school. But kids' opportunity to develop knowledge of and love for the Bible will be much greater if not only church teachers but also parents, grandparents, and daily caregivers show and tell them how to live with Scripture as a lamp to light the way.

Keeping a regular time for family devotions is a great way to foster love for the Bible and devotion to the Lord. But there are impediments to such a practice, including schedules with no room to breathe and our fears as adults that we don't know enough about the Bible to teach our children well. A more subtle hindrance is our desire to *control* kids' exposure to the Bible—to shield young readers from things in Scripture that may harm them, and to ensure that every passage is presented with a neatly packaged moral.

### **THE TIME CRUNCH**

Numerous activities compete for a slot on kids' daily planners. Or is it the parents whose planners are the problem? When I lead workshops on daily devotions with children, adults typically mention the time-crunch as their greatest concern. On weekdays the kids' afternoon and evening hours fly, with extracurricular activities, homework, dinner, and bedtime routines each claiming precious minutes. And if it happens that the kids are unscheduled, then the parents are frantic, trying to keep lives and household organized and jobs on track. "How," you may be asking, "can I squeeze any more moments out of each day?"

The time is there but you will have to work to find it, or to make it. Do you eat together as a family at least a few evenings per week? Then read and reflect as a family on a passage of Scripture before you say grace. Are bedtime stories a part of the nightly ritual with one or more of your children? Then make one of your readings each night a passage from the Bible. Some parents tell me that they gather for family devotions each morning, but I cannot imagine this working at my own house, given the weekday press just to get everyone out the door on time.

Take heart from the fact that you don't need to find large chunks of time. Even ten minutes each day, offered consistently, can take you and your family into the heart of Scripture. And don't be discouraged if you can't make it a time for the *whole* family: start one-on-one with a single child if that is what you can manage. Think of your minutes together as "planting time": you are planting and watering seeds of faith; God will give the growth (1 Corinthians 3:7). Once the seeds have sprouted, you may find that God-talk also happens readily at other times throughout your days: while riding with your children in the car, reflecting on a TV news report or an incident at school, or discussing a routine matter like

recycling or feeding the family pet. Look for ways to help your kids make connections between the Bible and what is happening in their lives. Don't suppose, however, that you will be the only one talking! Kids are natural-born theologians. It is their business to wonder why things are the way they are. Given a little encouragement and a steady diet of Scripture's stories, hymns, instructions, poems, and prophecies, children will see God in places that will astound and delight you.

### **THE QUESTIONS KIDS ASK!**

Many adults don't know the Bible well enough to feel confident teaching it to others. They are also intimidated by kids' questions, which can go to the very heart of hard theological topics like the universality of God's love ("Does God love terrorists?"), the meaning of Jesus' resurrection and the finality of death ("If God raised Jesus, then why does Grandpa have to stay dead?"), and the reliability of Scripture ("Why does the Bible say that God created sea monsters?").

If you do not know the Bible very well, there is good news: you don't have to know it all *today*, or even *tomorrow*—in fact the Bible is so wide and so deep that you will never reach the end of it, even if you read every word. Start with a single book of the Bible and move outward, learning with your children as you go. Or try using a devotional guide for children to help your family keep to a routine of daily Bible-reading and prayer. *Making Time for God: Daily Devotions for Children and Families to Share*, which I co-authored with Amy Plantinga Pauw (theologian, seminary colleague, friend, and fellow-mom) is a devotional guide that leads kids through better-known and also many lesser-known passages of Scripture, each accompanied by a meditation and short prayer to help stimulate family reflection and discussion.<sup>1</sup> Your pastor or church educator may suggest other devotional guides, as well as study Bibles and other resources for you to deepen your own knowledge of Scripture.

While on the topic of devotional materials, let me offer a word of caution: children's "story Bibles," which include collections of Bible stories (re-told, rather than excerpted directly from the Bible), are not "the real thing." To be sure, story Bibles have their place: they help those who don't know where to locate particular stories in the Bible, and their illustrations may capture the attention of younger readers. But such collections always go beyond what is written, supplying a particular interpreter's additions to and explanations of the biblical accounts. Moreover, story Bibles leave out some of the best parts of Scripture, usually those passages or books that do not readily adapt to "story"-format (the psalms and New Testament epistles, for example). So, use a "real Bible" with your children at least some of the time. Be sure to use a kid-friendly translation, such as the NIV (New International readers' Version), the CEV (Contemporary English Version), or the NLT (New Living Translation). Explain to your

children how the Bible is put together: what is meant by “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” for example, and where to find the table of contents for each. Whenever you read a passage, tell them what book you are reading from and offer a little information about when or where it was written (information readily available in any good study Bible). By doing so, you will help them learn to see the Bible as familiar territory, even home turf, rather than as a foreign land.

Your children will ask you questions about faith that will stump you. As parents, however, giving a wrong answer is not such a great risk. There are other, greater risks: the risk that by avoiding our children's questions we will convey that home is not the place to discuss serious matters, and the risk that our sons and daughters might miss the grand opportunity to live as children and friends of God. By making time for God in our daily family life, we say that knowing and trusting God are vital matters—that the Bible and the traditions of our faith teach us how to live. By hearing our children's questions, trying to answer them, and letting them know that we also value *their* opinion, we teach that the endeavor of bringing our lives into the light of Scripture is a crucially important one.<sup>2</sup> Love—our love for our children (attested by our spending time with them) and our love for Scripture—will cover a multitude of factual and interpretive errors. Stephanie Paulsell, now a professor of theology at Harvard, writes,

When I was a little girl, I used to read psalms every day with my father. He reads six psalms a day and writes down one verse from each in a little notebook, whatever strikes his heart on a particular day. I used to sit in the backyard with him and talk about which verses we might write down. I loved the feeling of handling those holy words with my dad as a child.<sup>3</sup>

That is what we want to give to our kids: a sense that handling these words is both a privilege and a great source of joy!

### **BEYOND NOAH'S ARK**

Are there parts of Scripture that are inappropriate for children? For younger kids, the answer is “yes.” Some passages of Scripture are X-rated, mostly for violence, including sexual violence. I would not, for example, teach children the story of the gang-rape and murder of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19). But not all the difficult stories can be readily by-passed: some of *the most central stories* of Jewish and Christian tradition are also profoundly frightening or brutal. These include, for example, the account of the Passover with its slaughter of firstborn males, the story of Abraham's call to sacrifice Isaac, and the story of Jesus' crucifixion. Recently a mother of a three-year-old asked me, “What do I do about Easter this year? I feel I ought to tell my son about the crucifixion, but he doesn't even understand death yet. Won't it harm him to hear such a terrible story?” I

didn't tell her what to do, but in general I think that we ought not to shield our kids too much.

Shielding kids is a hard habit to overcome, as Christian educator Gretchen Wolff Pritchard notes:

For children, the virtually unanimous witness of religious publishing and our own cultural conditioning is to proclaim an easy Good News, especially for kids: a simple blessing, instead of a sacrament of life out of death. God's in his heaven, all's right with the world, is the message—and the only thing missing is that we all have to try harder to be loving.<sup>4</sup>

But the world is a violent place—a place where the forces of death and destruction often have the upper hand. Instead of crossing our fingers and hoping that nothing dreadful will happen too close to home, Pritchard urges us to accept “that our children are called to travel with us through the hard and bitter mystery of the creation as it actually is.”<sup>5</sup> Our children need the *full* story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—not just the Easter joy but also Jesus' anointing at Bethany, his agony in Gethsemane, his being betrayed and then denied by his own, his silence before his judges, his pain and his sense of forsakenness on the cross. Our children need this story—and they need it earlier than we think.

Indeed, they need many stories. Newberry Award-winning children's author Katherine Paterson tells of growing up in China as the daughter of missionaries. Her parents read and re-read the stories of the Bible to their children “not to make us good but to tell us who we were.” She comments, “It is still hard for me to accept as fact that my blood ancestors were gentiles.... My

real ancestors left Ur of the Chaldeans with Abraham and wandered in the wilderness with Moses.”<sup>6</sup> The Bible gives us our identity by stretching our sense of time (from the dawn of creation to the end of the age) and our sense of family (not just blood relatives but countless brothers and sisters in faith). The Bible helps us understand what it means to be human: fallen and living in a fallen world, but beloved, and ever with reason for

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hope. Why, then, do we so seldom go beyond the stories of Noah's ark, David and Goliath, and Jesus blessing the children? Wonderful as these stories are (God's annihilation of nearly the entire population of the earth notwithstanding), there is far more to tell. "What should we tell the children?" Paterson asks. Then she answers her own question: "Tell them the stories!"<sup>7</sup>

As adults who care for children we easily fall into supposing that we ought to control everything they think. One sees this tendency at work in many of the religious videos and curricular or devotional materials written for children. Authors seem often to suppose that their task is to identify a moral for each Bible story and offer not the story but the moral. Frequently these "biblical" messages are re-packaged as modern "morality tales," in which it is not Moses, Miriam, Joshua, Jesus, and Paul who act

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but fictitious modern children, who learn such bland lessons as "Don't lie," "Don't cheat," "Obey your parents," "Witness to your friends," "Be nice to the lonely kid at school." Thus the stories of the Bible cease to function as stories and become only mechanisms to deliver pre-measured doses of instruction.<sup>8</sup> The Bible, like all great narratives, assists us in imagining a new and bigger world than the one we have previously known. To give the Bible to our children means allowing them to enter into that world and inhabit it for a time. We cannot control all that they will take away from the world of the Bible, but we can trust that they will be richer and more competent human beings because of what they encounter there.

My colleague Amy Plantinga Pauw compares the content-controlled fare of much children's religious instruction to a fast-food take-out meal: there are no surprises, and the fare is not very exciting or nutritious. The Bible, she suggests, is really more akin to a Thanksgiving feast: the table is loaded with far more food than we can eat. Some of the dishes are familiar, some not. Some are savory, others sweet, most are wholesome, and each is *someone's* favorite. Let us invite our children to the feast!

## **CONCLUSION**

For Christian parents, grandparents, and caregivers, teaching our children to know and love the Bible is a duty *and* a privilege, an obligation *and*

a source of joy. Yet this need to instruct children in Scripture causes anxiety for many. The brief pointers that I have offered in this article are meant to help adults meet and overcome some of the more common obstacles to reading the Bible with children. My desire has been to encourage and inspire those who want the children in their lives to walk in the light that Scripture sheds.

Christian education professor J. Bradley Wigger stresses the importance of teaching the Bible to our children, but also points out that *all* of our ways of “being family” constitute our children’s spiritual training. “Showing love and kindness to our children, teaching them to seek justice and care for the vulnerable in society, letting them know that we, their parents, also bow before a God of mercy and goodness—these are the spiritual disciplines of parenting and the piety of home.”<sup>9</sup> There is not one “right” formula for “being family”: *many* kinds of homes and *many* practices can embody the love, kindness, and reverence for God that children need. And so also there are many potential methods and opportunities to share Scripture with children. Find the practices that are right for you!

## NOTES

1 Susan R. Garrett and Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Making Time for God: Daily Devotions for Children and Families to Share* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2002).

2 On these points, see the fine book by J. Bradley Wigger, *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing our Children in Love & Grace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 143-145.

3 From a personal communication. Used with permission.

4 Gretchen Wolff Pritchard, *Offering the Gospel to Children* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1992), 33.

5 Ibid.

6 Quoted in Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 62.

7 From a lecture delivered at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, March 4, 2003.

8 Cf. Pritchard, *Offering the Gospel*, 18.

9 Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 91-92.



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