

# Good News for Your Kids

There's only one remedy for a child's inborn depravity: The new birth. Regeneration. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. . . . [Therefore,] you must be born again" (John 3:6–7).

Elsewhere Scripture describes the unregenerate as "dead in [their] trespasses and sins . . . [conducting themselves] in the lusts of [their] flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind . . . by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:1, 3). Like it or not, that is an apt description of your children—until they are born again.

## Evangelism at Home

Your top-priority job as a parent, then, is to be an evangelist in your home. You need to teach your children the law of God; teach them the gospel of divine grace; show them their need for a Savior; and point them to Jesus Christ as the only One who can save them. If they grow up without a keen awareness of their need for salvation, you as a parent will have failed in your primary task as their spiritual leader.

Note this, however: Regeneration is not something you can do *for* them. Parents who force, coerce, or manipulate their kids may pressure them into a *false* profession, but genuine faith is something only divine grace can prompt. The new birth is a work of the Holy Spirit. "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Only God can work sovereignly in your children's hearts to draw them to Himself. Their salvation is a matter that must ultimately be settled between them and God.

But as parents, you are nonetheless responsible to exalt Christ in your home and point your kids to Him as Savior. "How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher" (Romans 10:14)? As believing parents, you are the first and most important preachers God has given them. They will observe your lives up close, to see whether *you* seriously believe what you are teaching them. They will weigh what you teach them about these matters from the earliest time they can understand anything. You have a better opportunity than anyone to help frame what they know about Christ. Every moment of their lives is a teaching opportunity (Deuteronomy 6:6–7), and you should use those opportunities to the best advantage for your kids' sake.

## Giving the Gospel to Your Kids

The one practical question I am most commonly asked by parents is this: How should I present the gospel to my children? Pitfalls, both real and imagined, intimidate virtually every parent who contemplates this responsibility. On one hand, we don't want to confound our kids with theological details that are over their heads. What's the best approach to take? When is the best time to start? How old is "old enough" for our kids to have genuine saving faith? What if they ask questions we cannot answer? How do we know we're doing it right? It seems all too easy for parents to give their kids an inadequate or twisted message.

But there's no need to be paralyzed by such fears. The gospel is simple and should be presented simply. Parents have the best years of the child's life to explain, clarify, stress, and reemphasize gospel truths. The key is to be faithful and consistent in both teaching and exemplifying the gospel. One of the worst things parents can do is be intimidated into thinking someone else would make a better evangelist for their child, thus abdicating their most crucial responsibility, missing the best opportunities for reaching their children, and forfeiting the best blessings of parenthood.

### **Take Your Time and Be Thorough**

Here's some foundational advice: Think of leading your children to Christ as a long-term, full-time assignment—the most important duty God has given you as a parent.

Be thorough. There is no good reason for parents to soften or abridge the gospel for their kids. Parents more than anyone have ample time to be thorough and clear; to explain and illustrate; to listen to feedback; to correct misunderstanding; and to clarify and review the difficult parts. It is the best possible scenario for evangelism. The wise parent will be faithful, patient, persistent, and thorough. In fact, that is precisely what Scripture demands of every parent:

These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. (Deuteronomy 6:6-7)

Don't think of the gospel as something suited only for special evangelistic occasions. Don't assume Sunday school classes or children's Bible clubs will give your children all the gospel truth they need. Look for and seize the many daily opportunities you will have for highlighting and punctuating gospel truth in your kids' thinking.

### **Beware of False Assurance**

Don't rely too much on canned or formulaic gospel presentations. Many of the programmed approaches to child evangelism leave out key parts of the message. They fail to explain the concepts of sin and the holiness of God. They say nothing of repentance. But then they typically solicit some active response from the child—a show of hands in a group setting, a rote prayer on Mother's lap, or almost anything that may be counted as a positive response. After that, the child is deemed regenerate, and the parents are encouraged to focus on giving verbal assurances of salvation. As a consequence, the church is filled with teenagers and adults whose hearts are devoid of real love for Christ, but who think they are genuine Christians because of something they *did* as children.

Avoid that pitfall. Do not assume your child's first positive response is full-fledged saving faith. If you think a three-year-old's prayer inviting Jesus into her heart automatically guarantees her a place in the kingdom, your notion of what it means to trust Christ isn't very biblical.

It is true that saving faith is a childlike trust, and in that sense all sinners must become like little children in order to be saved (Matthew 18:3-4). But the emphasis in that statement is not on the *ignorance* of children but on their lack of achievement and their utter

helplessness. They have no personal accomplishments worth anything in saving them (Philippians 3:7-9). They are helpless, depending totally on God to provide everything for them. Just like an infant.

On the other hand, real faith involves understanding and affirming some important concepts that may be out of reach for small children (Romans 10:14; cf. 1 Corinthians 14:20). The sole object of genuine faith is Jesus Christ *as He is presented to us in the gospel*. How can children exercise true saving faith before they are old enough to understand and affirm essential, objective elements of gospel truth? Saving faith is not *blind* faith. Real saving faith cannot be ignorant of essential gospel concepts such as good and evil, sin and punishment, repentance and faith, God's holiness and His wrath against sin, Christ as God incarnate, the idea of atonement for sin and the meaning of the resurrection and lordship of Christ. The specific age at which the child's understanding is mature enough to grasp such concepts may differ for each child. (So there's no reliable way to pinpoint a physical "age of accountability.") But until the child demonstrates some degree of real understanding and some measure of spiritual fruit, parents should not be quick to regard the child's regeneration as a settled matter.

Nonetheless, don't write off childlike expressions of faith as meaningless or trivial. Parents should encourage every sign of faith in their children. Don't ridicule or belittle them for the things they fail to understand. Use the opportunity to teach them more. Feed their desire to learn about Christ, and encourage their every profession of faith. Even if you conclude it's too early to regard their interest in Christ as mature faith, don't deride it as merely a false profession. It may be the seed from which mature faith will later emerge. And don't be discouraged by misunderstanding or ignorance. Even the most mature believer does not fully comprehend all truth accurately. Keep teaching them in the spirit of Deuteronomy 6:6-7.

Nothing a parent can do will actually guarantee the salvation of a child. We cannot believe *for* them by proxy. We might coax or cajole them into a spurious profession of faith, but genuine faith is prompted by God's work in the child's heart (John 6:44-45). We might talk them into a false assurance, but *true* assurance is the Holy Spirit's work (Romans 8:15-16). Be careful not to intrude into a realm that belongs to God alone. Don't employ external inducements, peer pressure, the power of suggestion, the lure of approval, the fear of rejection, or any other artificial means, to entice a superficial response from your child. But be faithful, patient, and thorough. And bathe your efforts in prayer for your child's salvation, always bearing in mind that God does His work where you cannot—in the child's heart.