

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **Family Relationships - Children, Parents and Grandparents**

One afternoon I was resting on the settee and dozed off. I was stirred from sleep by someone pulling my hair and shouting in my ear. The "someone" was my youngest granddaughter, Rebekah, who, at just over a year old, has learned how to get your attention. Having had my sleep so suddenly disturbed, I was calmed by Psalm 127:3-5, "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD ... Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; they shall not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies in the gate." Had the Psalmist ever had his afternoon nap spoiled by his granddaughter, I wondered?!

Last week we looked at the subject of Christian marriage and how this lifelong relationship forms the basis of God's model for family life. We saw how Christian marriage is based upon love for God and love towards each other. If this sacrificial love is vital to a successful marriage, it is also essential to bringing up children. The demands children place upon parents and the demands upon children themselves, are enormous. This is all the more challenging as we are faced by the spiritual and moral dangers of today's world.

It is natural for a couple to want children and many couples assume they will have them without difficulty. However, it is not uncommon to have problems conceiving children. Whatever the reasons are for such problems, it is so important to support each other when these circumstances occur. We have to face up to the problems which confront us in life. But, as Christians, we can face them with God. I have always been impressed by the way Hannah, the mother of Samuel, coped with childlessness and also the failure of her husband to understand the distress this caused her. You can read her story in 1 Samuel 1 and 2. She went into the presence of God and poured out her feelings with an honesty which is an example to us all. She teaches us a lot about real prayer and how problems should always take us closer to God rather than driving us away from Him. Her prayer was answered. However, praying for something is not a guarantee that God will give us what we want. Some of the most godly couples I know have been unable to have children of their own. Some have accepted this and served the Lord simply as man and wife and found ways to express their love beyond their marriages. I remember with great affection one couple, now with the Lord, who helped me so much spiritually. They had no children of their own, yet took every opportunity draw young people to the Saviour and to teach them Christian discipleship. Other couples have found an outlet for their love by adopting children and giving them a loving home. It is very important to seek the Lord's direction and to follow His will together.

So, what did the Psalmist mean by "children being a heritage from the LORD"? The heritage looks back to Genesis 1:28 when God blessed men and women and said, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." The promise of children and the development of society had God's blessing. But along with this blessing came responsibility. The first child mentioned in the Bible is Cain. He was also the first murderer and God held him responsible for the actions he took against his brother. He could not escape by claiming not to be his brother's keeper.

God expected Adam and Eve to raise their family in a spiritual way. It seems they had done this and, as a consequence, their younger son Abel worshipped God. Because of his faith, he became the first martyr. This story teaches us about two important aspects of bringing up children. First, there is the parents' responsibility. This is explained in the words of the New Testament, which are particularly addressed to fathers, "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." The idea of training is to show by example, whereas admonition has more to do with explaining where things have gone wrong and showing how to put them right. In response to this, there is the responsibility of the children, "Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord." Colossians 3:20. One of the features of the last days is that men will be "disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy," 2 Timothy 3:2. Married men taking up Christian service have to demonstrate that they have a stable family life, "Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well" 1 Timothy 3:12.

Eventually children have to make their own decisions and these decisions determine not only our personal lives, but the character of our families and society in general.

Let us think a little more about the first family in the Bible. It is interesting that when God created Adam and Eve, He created them as mature people able to take responsibility in the world. They had no childhood. Childhood, for all its

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wonder, is a passing phase leading to maturity. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:11, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child; I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." He also reminds the Ephesians, "no longer [to] be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting" Ephesians 4:14. Childhood has its limitations and it is important to understand this. We should not make greater demands upon children than are realistic. Nor should we try to live out our own ambitions through our children. I have seen parents become very competitive about their children expecting them to do well against other children. Then, either glorying in their success or showing disapproval in their failure. Parents are to be natural with their children. In the words of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:11, "you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children." The father is presented as someone who encourages, comforts and sets standards for his children. Equally a mother's gentleness and the sense of value she places upon her children is vital, "But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children." 1 Thessalonians 2:7. These complementary roles of the father and mother are critical to the upbringing of children.

In contrast to Adam, when Jesus came into the world, it was not as a full grown man, but as a baby. He experienced all the wonder of childhood. It is Luke who tells us about this. He traces the development of the Lord's life in this world. He alone tells us of the Lord as a baby being taken into the temple. His parents came with two turtle doves as a sacrifice. It was the sacrifice of poor people and demonstrated the reality of the Lord Jesus entering for us into all the poverty of this world. But the effect the Child had upon the hearts of faithful men and women like Simeon and Anna showed He had also come in power. What powerful mystery there is in the creator God being held in the arms of His old servant, Simeon, who said "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation" (Luke 2:29-30).

The Lord's childhood gives us an insight into the critical stages of a child's development. First there is the preparation for a child's birth. Both Mary and Joseph were prepared by God to begin a family. The "baby" industry is worth billions of pounds today. There are innumerable products available for babies and their parents. But how much spiritual preparation goes into beginning a family? Family planning is not simply about contraception but about preparing spiritually as well as materially for children. Pray for your children before they are born and never stop praying for them.

God chose the right people to be the mother and guardian of His Son. And Luke records that the child Jesus "grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him." Luke 2:40. This followed His dedication to God in the temple and being in the home of godly parents. We are often interested in the success of our children at school and work. Even amongst Christians, the emphasis can often be on material attainments. But how well prepared are we to bring up our children in a spiritual way? This comes down to the time and effort we put into being examples to our children of the living faith we have in Christ. If praying and reading, and obeying, God's word do not seem important to me they will not be important to my children. And children are well able to spot inconsistency and hypocrisy in the lives of their elders. In this way they are a constant challenge to the reality of parents, Christianity. They also help us to understand the Christian pathway by their ability to trust. The Lord Jesus said, in Matthew 18:3, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." When my daughter was very young, she was invited to our next door neighbours for tea. As tea began, she said "Aren't we going to say thank you to Jesus for the food?" Our neighbours admitted it was a long time since they had given thanks but they started again that day!

Luke next records the young boy Jesus staying behind in Jerusalem and confounding the wisest men of the day. The "Ancient of Days" as a twelve year old! Luke gives us the first words of Jesus; "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My father's business?" Luke also records the subjection of Jesus as He takes His place in family life and increases in wisdom and stature.

This incident in the Lord's life shows the importance of the spiritual development of children in those critical adolescent years. It shows how the Lord as a young Man was doing God's will. It is at this stage in life that many young people begin to take an interest in spiritual things. This needs to be nurtured especially in terms of answering the many questions which arise about Christian discipleship. It is so important to allow children to be able to ask questions which concern them no matter how sensitive or challenging. The way we answer questions and the humility of being able to say we do not know all the answers are important. We have to strike the happy balance of not being patronising to young adults or dismissive of their concerns. Build lifelong relationships with your children.

It has often struck me that the prodigal son felt he could go back to his father. They had a relationship which allowed a way back. The father never closed the door on the son who left. Sadly, many Christian parents and children have said and done things which have made reconciliation almost impossible. This is all the more sad because God is the God of reconciliation and when relationships break down, Christians should always look for ways to restore such relationships. There was never a relationship so broken as that between God and man. God, at immense cost, made it possible for a new relationship to be formed. A family relationship. God the Father and we His children. The father

in the story of the prodigal son is a great example to all Christian parents as one who was ready with open arms to receive back his lost son. Always give your children a way back when things go wrong.

So childhood is about growth. Christian parenting is about ensuring that children grow physically, psychologically and spiritually in a safe, stable and loving home. In 2 Corinthians 12:14, Paul teaches the principle of parents providing for their children, "And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children." Parents need to look after and feed their children and provide the stimulus they require to develop in a natural and balanced way. Today the government is promoting, through initiatives like the Healthy Schools Programme, healthy eating and recreation so that children grow up fit and strong. But there is the need for a healthy mind. It is too easy today to allow children to drift into too much television and video watching or endless computer games. Television has been described as "chewing gum for the mind". As Christian parents we should have a balanced but challenging approach. I have come across Christian parents who will not have television in their home but allow their children to watch it at friends' homes oblivious to what they are viewing.

So often Christians are on the defensive when challenged about a lifestyle which appears to be restrictive and blinkered. We should not be extreme or legalistic in our views. Jesus spoke about having life and having it more abundantly. We should celebrate the blessings of Christian family life and demonstrate its power, joy and fulfilment.

Over Christmas I was on my way to our Sunday morning Breaking of Bread service and passed a very long queue of standing traffic waiting to go to a local supermarket which already had a full car park. It saddened me that, in all the turmoil that now surrounds Christmas, the peace of the first Christmas is no longer understood. The angels' message was "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and goodwill to all men". A sense of peace is not apparent and we also appear to have lost the importance of being able to rest. God instituted this on a weekly basis. A day to recoup. A time to enjoy family life and the worship of God. During Victoria's reign, when working people laboured six days a week, the parks were closed on a Sunday. John Nelson Darby wrote to the national press complaining that it was not right that the ordinary man and his family were unable to enjoy the fresh air and beauty of the parks on the only day free for this to be possible. Rest is a key part of family life because it is a time for parents and children to be together to understand each other and to develop the relationships which are so important. We seem to be in danger of sacrificing these valuable opportunities to commercialism at the very time when life is more stressful than ever and so the need to relax is all the more important. John Wesley's mother kept all the best toys until Sunday. She had the wisdom to get her children to look forward to the day when, as a family, they would worship and spend time together. Her godly parenting had an impact, through her remarkable sons, upon a whole nation at a time when the chaos and bloodshed of the French Revolution threatened to spill over onto our shores. Never underestimate the power and influence of Christian family life. Let's witness to its power and sense.

This brings us to some other important family members - grandparents. There are several problems with grandparents. They can be too distant so that parents and children never gain from the benefit of their involvement in the family. They can be too close and interfere in the family life of their children. They can be taken for granted and used as baby sitters and child minders so that their children can do the things they want to do with the least inconvenience.

How does the Bible view grandparents? One thing I like, but which may come as a surprise to my own grandchildren, is that grandparents should be looked after when this becomes necessary. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:4, "But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God." This is one of those verses which makes us think about old age and our responsibility for parents and grandparents. The demands of such care are considerable but the Bible places upon Christians the responsibility to ensure that elderly parents are cared for in a loving and dignified way when they are no longer able to care for themselves. I remember reading the story of a poor Christian family in Rochdale who had their elderly father living with them. It was many years ago when workhouses existed. Things had become so difficult that the son decided to take his father to the local workhouse. It was at the top of a long hill. The son carried the father on his back and rested half way up the hill. As he turned to his father he noticed his father was crying. "It's no good crying, father," said the son. "You have to go to the workhouse". "I'm not crying because you are taking me there", replied the old man "but because I can remember the day I took the same journey with my father". The son put his father on his back and walked down the hill back home. Old age is one of those things which seems so distant until we suddenly find ourselves unable to do all the things we took for granted. It is at this time of insecurity we need our family. Not just to do things for us, but to be valued and included.

But the Bible also explains what grandparents can do. We read in Deuteronomy 4:9, "Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren". Grandparents are to be teachers. I was once talking to a very able accountant with wide business experience who felt his father, who was not highly educated or widely travelled, had little to teach him. I questioned this, pointing out that his father, who was a very godly man, had an enormous amount to teach him in spiritual matters which could have a great impact on his business life. It is

easy to dismiss aged people as having nothing to contribute to today's fast moving world when they have much to impart if we had the time to stop and listen and learn.

Grandparents also have a very important commodity - time. The freedom to spend time as they see fit. Time to help and time to teach. Timothy gained a great deal from his grandmother, "I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also" 2 Timothy 1:5. This is a beautiful verse because it demonstrates the harmony of a mother and grandmother in the spiritual upbringing of a child. From these two women, the child Timothy had learned the Scriptures which were able to make him wise unto salvation. Wisdom is linked with age and experience.

Timothy's story is very interesting. His father was a Greek. He is not named. It is quite likely that there were spiritual tensions within Timothy's home. On the one hand, there was the influence of two Christian women from godly Jewish backgrounds; on the other hand were the pressures of a mixed marriage in a Greek culture. Yet in spite of these difficulties, Timothy is given a godly up-bringing. This is a great encouragement in our own day. In spite of the tensions of living in homes where there may not be common belief, we can still trust God to bless our witness and our faith in His word to our husbands, wives, children and grandchildren. God is able to bless in difficult circumstances. It is also wonderful to see the support of grandparents. Marriage is God's basis for family life and all the relationships it provides. In a society where old age is less and less respected, Christians are to value the role of the grandparent. Their role is to be a support to their children and grandchildren and to be fruitful in their old age.

There was once a diplomat whose father was a godly retired minister and a remarkable personal evangelist. His son invited him to a party where there many distinguished people including an important French guest. During the evening, the old man got into deep conversation with the Frenchman, so much so that the son decided to intervene. Some months later the old man died. At the funeral, there were many wreaths in appreciation for the minister's fruitful life. As the son looked over them he found one from the Frenchman. It simply read, "To the man who cared for my soul!"

"They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing," Psalm 92:14.

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