

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Help! We are married: Help! We've being invaded

In the Old Testament the story is recounted of when Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria came up and surrounded the city of Samaria and besieged it (1 Kings 20:1-22). He sent messengers to Ahab the king of Samaria offering really onerous terms of peace (1 Kings 20:2-3) which King Ahab accepted (1 Kings 20:4). He was a weak king in a very weak position. King Ben-Hadad of Syria then sent messengers a second time demanding even more demeaning concessions from King Ahab of Samaria (1 Kings 20:5-6) which the king refused to accept (1 Kings 20:7-9). Ben-Hadad was furious and sent word back to King Ahab of exactly what he and his vastly superior forces would do to Samaria and its inhabitants. It's the reply that King Ahab gave that I want you to notice. *"Let not the one who puts on his armour boast like the one who takes it off"*, 1 Kings 20:11. A courageous answer, but a very wise one as well. The subsequent happenings however prove the truth of the statement. God intervened for His people and the Syrian army was completely routed.

It's the truth of the statement that got me thinking though. "Let not the one who puts on his armour boast like the one who takes it off" (1 Kings 20:11). My wife and I have been blessed with two lovely children, now all grown up in their twenties, but they are still our children and I do not think we will ever be in a position to say our work with them and for them is finished. I do not think we will ever be able to lower our guard or take off our armour as we pray for them. What I am trying to say is that we will never be able to relax, sit back, pat ourselves on the back and say that we did a good job! Children are a gift from God, and any blessing in their lives is a result of His grace and goodness.

There are several verses that I want to think about in relation to our subject "Help! We've been invaded, parents and children" but rather than read them all at once I will refer to them as we progress. The first verse I want to read is very short and is found in 1 Samuel 1:27. Just five words: *"For this child I prayed."* I suppose that in one sense parents who are overwhelmed by the arrival of a child and seek help have left it a bit late! Hannah prayed for her child Samuel years before he was conceived let alone born! As newly married couples we expect our relationship to be blessed with children, this is natural and also what we learn from the beginning of time. Adam and Eve were given to each other, man and woman, for among other things, the procreation of children. Psalm 127:3 reads *"Behold children are a heritage from the LORD."* Spare a thought however for those couples whose marriages are not blessed with children. The pain of childlessness is intense, more so, probably for the wife than the husband, and often worse when surrounded by friends of a similar age who are expecting babies. Please be aware of their pain and be careful in your comments.

So Hannah had prayed for many years for her child (1 Samuel 1:27); not just that she might bear a child but that she might care for it and raise it in a way that was pleasing to God. Have we prayed about our families even before, in the will of God, they arrive? Are we prepared, like Hannah to commit our children to God and pray that above everything else they will grow up to love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ through the course of their lives? We invest so much in our children. A recent report suggested that the average cost in the United Kingdom in 2013 of raising a child, and providing for all their needs, including education through to graduating from university, is in the order of £220,000. This seems an unbelievable amount of money, how much time do we also add into this cost, and yet for the most part we do so willingly and with a degree of purpose. Indeed we are often driven to provide the best for our children regardless of whether or not we can really afford it.

But how much time and money do we invest in the spiritual welfare of our children? Are we, am I, more concerned that they "get on" in the world than that they prosper spiritually? Is it more important to me that my children are successful at school or college, are holding down some well paid, prestigious job, or that they are true Christians seeking before everything else to serve their Saviour. Solomon, King David's son might not be a perfect example but in his early life he had right priorities. When asked by God what he most desired he didn't seek for power or riches but instead he replied, *"Give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?"*, 1 Kings 3:9. Do I actively seek to guide and instruct my children in the decisions they make, giving most weight to what will please God and further His interests?

I suppose we have an example here of the words of the Lord in Matthew 6:33. *"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."* In Solomon's life he was blessed with much else beside the wisdom he asked God for, this will not always be the case, but we must have right priorities. Our children

are a blessing given to us by God, and our first concern must be to bring them up in a way that is pleasing to Him. How do we do this?

I have mentioned prayer already. We must pray for our children! We prayed for our children before they were conceived, we prayed for them while still in the womb and we still pray for them every day. Job is an example of a parent who continued to pray for his children through the course of their lives. The Bible tells us that “[Job] was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). He was also an immensely rich man of business but even though he must have had much to occupy him he prayed for his family. We read, “*And his sons would go and feast in their houses, each on his appointed day, and would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. So it was, when the days of feasting had run their course, that Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, ‘It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.’ Thus Job did regularly*”, Job 1:4-5.

Not only should we pray for our children but we must also pray with our children. We need them to realise the Friend they have that they can talk to at any time. One who is a perfect Father God who will never let them down, and cares deeply for them. It is to be expected that their concerns will be childish, they are after all children! But their concerns are very real to them and can be troubling. Who better to tell than their Heavenly Father, who is always listening and never sleeps (see Psalm 121:3-4). It is a truly wonderful privilege to kneel with your child by their bed and pray for them and pray with them as they in simple words and simple faith tell God about their hopes and fears. It is a habit that cannot begin too early. It is a challenge to me as well! Is our first recourse when facing a problem to scheme and try and work a way out for ourselves or do we consistently turn first in prayer to God and bring the problem to Him? With children it can never be a case of “Don’t do as I do, do as I say”!

We must also teach them that we value God’s Word, the Bible. Children love to be read to from a very early age and there are plenty of exciting stories in the Bible that they will quickly learn to love. Be sensible in your choice of stories obviously, but also be sensible in your choice of version if you are reading to them straight from the Bible. Find a children’s version that is accessible to them, that uses language that they can understand and has plenty of pictures for them to look at if they get bored! And they will get bored and distracted. I am sure that a short regular time spent reading the Bible to our children is preferable to a marathon reading once a week that they quickly grow to dread.

Timothy is an example in the New Testament of someone with godly parents who was instructed in God’s Word from a young age. Paul writes to him and says “*But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus*”, 2 Timothy 3:14-15. In Timothy’s case he benefited not only from a godly mother, Eunice, but also from a godly grandmother, Lois (see 2 Timothy 1:5). It is a tremendous blessing to grow up in such a household, but remember what Billy Graham said. “Being born in a garage doesn’t make you a car! Being born into a Christian home doesn’t make you a Christian!” We can bring our children up to pray and value the Scriptures, but they must personally place their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus. Notice Paul said in relation to the Scriptures that they “*are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus*” (2 Timothy 3:15). It isn’t an automatic outcome!

King David, the Psalmist said on at least three occasions “*Oh, how I love Your law!*”, Psalm 119:96, 113, 163. Do we have the same love of the Bible as David? He went on to say “*It is my meditation all the day*”, Psalm 119:97. It was David’s constant companion and resource. Children will very quickly sense if we do value and love the Bible or if we are just going through the motions. And this brings me to another point. Am I a hypocrite? It is not difficult to put on a smart suit and assume a charitable attitude for a few hours each week at church, but what am I like in the home?

My fellow Christians see me for at most a few hours each week, my children see me all day every day. They see the real me! Quite apart from my attitude to prayer and reading the Word of God what is my behaviour like in the home. This is serious stuff! I might like to be seen serving in the church, but am I prepared to serve at home? Home-making is a full time occupation, and I do realise that in today’s economic climate it is often extraordinarily difficult to find employment and make ends meet. But if it is possible to sacrifice some of the so-called necessities, but which might actually turn out to be luxuries, so that we can spend more time being with our children, this is an investment that God will honour.

But this is not only the responsibility of the wife, who is generally the primary carer. What about me as a father and husband when I get in from work. Do I love to spend time playing with my children and allow my wife to have quiet time of her own? Or do I expect to be waited on, with dinner on the table and my slippers warming by the fire? Children need both the example of biblical womanhood and biblical manhood. The standard set for the husband is so very high. Paul writes to the Ephesian Christians and says “*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her*” Ephesians 5:25. The romantic love that first marked our relationship must be consolidated and cemented by serving and sacrificial love. The interests of my wife are more urgent than my own

interests and when and if children arrive their interests also rank ahead of mine. I should be very low down in the pecking order!

Now what about the thorny issue of discipline? We now find ourselves in a country that has set itself against so many principles laid down in the Scriptures. We have seen it legislate in relation to Sunday trading and gay marriage, but it also interferes in family life. The Bible speaks very clearly on the issue of discipline:

- *“Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of correction will drive it far from him”, Proverbs 22:15.*
- *“For whom the LORD loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights”, Proverbs 3:12.*

Or, in the New Testament,

- *“If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?” Hebrews 12:7.*

The Bible clearly advocates corporal punishment!

My wife and I were able to bring up our children at a time when it was still acceptable to smack our children. The strange thing is that it wasn't often that it was necessary! Children need boundaries and rules. These need to be lovingly upheld and infringements dealt with consistently and proportionately. Our children quickly learnt where these boundaries were and what happened if they overstepped them. Understanding this enabled them to enjoy themselves without constantly being shouted at by frustrated parents at the end of their tethers! Consequently the need for smacking or discipline was quite limited. We made mistakes, obviously. It is never right to discipline in a fit of temper, and sometimes we just simply misunderstood, or misread a situation. But even then there is the possibility to teach, parents make mistakes too. And parents also need to show by example that we all need to say sorry sometimes.

Where does that leave young parents in today's society? I am not sure. The Bible lays out clearly the need for discipline, society would seek to outlaw smacking. Christian parents must be guided by their own conscience as to what to do, and how to discipline their own children. In passing, when I was a young boy I grew up with children who, if they misbehaved, were told, “just wait till your father gets home!” It is the responsibility of both parents to discipline and to do it to the same rules, and consistently to the same standard. It is not fair for the mum to abdicate this responsibility to the father, and make his home-coming a source of fear rather than fun. Obviously the same is true for the dad. Children quickly learn to exploit any differences that exist in standards and discipline between their parents.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul gives instruction to both children and fathers *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honour your father and mother,’ which is the first commandment with promise: ‘that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’ And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord”, Ephesians 6:1-4.* If this was a message for children we would concentrate on the first verses of this portion of Scripture, emphasising the need for children to be obedient and the promised blessings that flow from honouring our parents, but this is a message for parents, and Paul warns fathers *“[not to] provoke their children to wrath”, (Ephesians 6:4).* We probably think that our children often provoke us, but Paul warns us not to provoke them! We are warned not to be harsh, inconsistent or unreasonably demanding of our children and loving and gracious in all our dealings with our wives.

In line with this Paul continues and says *“bring them [our children] up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”, Ephesians 6:4.* To nurture is to provide ideal conditions for growth. We must do that in a physical sense but here Paul is primarily talking about spiritual matters, it is *“of the Lord.”* We must do all within our power to provide an environment where our children learn of the love of the Lord Jesus and are told of His righteous claims over them. This will affect every area of family life. The music we listen to, the books we read and what we watch on the television if we have one. It will influence our conversations at the dinner table and even the holidays we take! We can use our holidays to encourage our children to meet other young Christians. It will require sacrifice, but these children are precious to God and have been entrusted to us for just a short while to care for.

And it is just for so short a while. All too quickly our children mature and grow up, they enter further education, they will make close friendships and they in turn may marry. All this can be a very testing time for parents, letting go! We all have to do it, hopefully we have trained and nurtured them to become well balanced independent young men and women and they will want more freedom. It will be an anxious time for parents. “Have they meet the right partner?” “Will they continue in their Christian faith?” We have to leave these things with the Lord.

A verse from the book of Proverbs is a great encouragement, *“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it”, Proverbs 22:6.* Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-28) is a great example to all Christian parents. Having been childless for years (1 Samuel 1:5) and having to endure the taunts of another callous woman who had

children (1 Samuel 1:6), Hannah had finally been blessed with a child (1 Samuel 1:20) and yet as she had promised, when the child was weaned she devoted Samuel to the service of God (1 Samuel 1:27). It must have been heart-breaking, but Samuel grew up to become probably the greatest prophet in the Old Testament. What a tremendous joy that must have been to Hannah!

Another beautiful picture of "letting go" is found in the well known story of Moses in the bulrushes by the side of the river Nile in Egypt (Exodus 2:1-10). His parents had honoured God and by doing so had flouted the law of Pharaoh and raised their son faithfully, but now they could keep him hidden and safe no longer, they literally "let him go" and trusted that God would look after him, and God did, and in a most remarkable way. Moses was raised and cared for in the palace of the very man who had decreed that he must be killed! (Exodus 2:9). Moses like Samuel grew up to be a mighty servant of Jehovah.

I do fully realise that we cannot secure our children's eternal salvation ourselves, but I do trust that this look at several verses scattered throughout the Bible will encourage us all to "*bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord*", (Ephesians 6:4) and also to do all within our power to help them, "*grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever. Amen*", 2 Peter 3:18.

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