

PRESENTING THE GOSPEL TO YOUR CHILDREN.

Preparation

The most significant Gospel presentation you will make is the one you make to your kids. There is no better gift we can give our children than the gift of salvation. Unfortunately, while we know this to be true, many of us feel uncomfortable or unprepared to talk to our kids about Jesus. We tend to want to leave the subject in the hands of pastors, Sunday school teachers, youth group leaders or special programs.

Don't despair. It is no accident you are the parents of your children, and God will equip you for the task of introducing His glory to them (Heb 13:21). A lot of prayer, a little preparation and an understanding of the child's perspective can help you make the story of redemption through Jesus Christ as compelling for your child as it was for you. In fact, your child's limited ability to comprehend the more esoteric elements of Christianity may help you rediscover the simplicity of the Gospel message. If you break it down, there really are just three issues a child needs to understand to be saved: (1) sin, (2) substitutionary atonement, and (3) faith or trust.

Your Role

Before we look at the elements of the Gospel, it is important to understand our role in the process. We cannot bring our children to a saving faith by our own efforts. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. We are a tool that can be used by God, but it is His effort that will draw them to Him. Our job is to remain faithful to be used by Him and to exercise the power, knowledge and experience He has given

us for the benefit of our kids. One of the powers (and privileges) He has granted us is the power we have as a “royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9) to pray for those who are not yet saved. God has promised that when his people pray to Him as such, He will hear their prayers (1 Pet 2:5). Don’t underestimate the power of prayer for your children. It is an essential first step and one for which you are well suited.

In addition, it is likely we can be used by God to make a clear presentation of His message to our kids. As parents of your family, you are the most influential people in your child’s life. God put you in that position, and one of the main purposes for that role is to make Him known. This requires some preparation on your part. You should fully understand the message of the Gospel and be able to explain it clearly to your children. If your children are young (less than 12), consider using concrete terms to explain the principles to them. They may not comprehend figures of speech such as a “personal relationship” or “asking Jesus into your heart”.

Sin

In order to understand the necessity of a Savior, your kids have to understand the concept of sin. This is not as easy as it seems because it is not just the existence of sin that is important, but the effect sin has on our relationship with God. I think a good, simple example of both is the story of the Garden of Eden. Here is an example: Before there was anything, God created the earth and everything on it. It was perfect. Then, he created the first man and woman. It was still perfect. Adam and Eve lived and worked in the Garden,

named the animals, walked and talked with God every day, and ate from every plant and tree in the Garden. There was just one tree, in the middle of the Garden, that God told them they could not eat from (Gen 1 & 2).

Sadly, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate from the one tree He had made off-limits. That was the first sin – when they disobeyed God. As a result, they were no longer allowed to stay with the Perfect God in the Perfect Garden. Disobedience to God causes us to be separated from Him. Since Adam and Eve, all people have faced the same problem – they disobey God’s commands and are separated from Him. You may want to explain that “sin” means missing the mark, that is that anything we do that does not agree with the perfect God is considered sin. When we tell a lie, when we are mean to our brother or sister, etc, we are sinning. Just one sin makes us less than perfect and separated from God. And, we know that we all sin more than just once.

The Bible tells us everyone sins. It says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). That means you and me and mom and everyone on this earth. We all sin and are separated from God. And, that is not how we want to live our lives. Being separated from God by sin means that when we die, we cannot be with Him in heaven because heaven is perfect. The Bible tells us the penalty for missing the mark is death (Rom 6:23). That’s pretty bad news, isn’t it?

Substitutionary Atonement

When you are able to tell the story similarly to the way it is outlined above, it builds a little suspense, but it can be scary for a small child (hey, it’s still scary

for me). Thinking about death and separation from God are pretty big thoughts, and you will want to move from the bad news to the good news pretty quickly. (I also recommend you not use the term “substitutionary atonement” when you talk about the good news, but to use concrete terms they can grasp and understand). Here is an idea: Being separated from God is pretty scary, isn’t it? Thankfully, God loves you and me very, very much. The Bible says “no power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord,” (Rom 8:39 NLT). Even our sin does not keep God from loving us. He wants us to be part of His family and to live with Him forever. So, He has an answer for our problem of sin and separation.

God knew we would sin. He also knew sin would have to be punished. But, because He loved us very much and He did not want to punish us with death, He sent His very own Son (Jesus) from heaven to take our place. The Bible tells us Jesus came from heaven and lived on the earth, just like us. He was born as a baby, and grew up to be a man. There was one big difference between you and me and Jesus though; Jesus did not sin. He was the only person who never sinned. And even though Jesus never sinned, God sent His Son to take our place and be punished for our sin. Jesus suffered and died on the cross as the penalty for us! That is how much God loves us. Even though we have disobeyed God many times, he sent His Son to die in our place (Rom 5:8).

When Jesus died in our place, God completely forgot about all our sins, including those in the past and those in the future. He says now there is no punishment for those who believe in Jesus. Jesus took our punishment for us (Rom 8:1-2). That's pretty good news, don't you agree?

Now, the concept of the death of Jesus may be a little hard for a younger child to have to handle, and I think it is a great idea to mention the resurrection as well. You might say, after Jesus died for us, God raised Him from the dead. He actually came back to life and went back to heaven to be with God. He is there now. Jesus is alive and well and watching out for us (Rom 8:34). That is a sign for us that we are going to also go to be with God and live forever with Him in Heaven.

Faith or Trust

Unfortunately, not everyone who understands the story takes the final step of faith or trust in the substitutionary atonement of Christ. It is important to finish the presentation. This is where we can get caught up in some of the evangelism practices that obscure the basic nature of faith and trust in Jesus. What I mean is that the step of faith required to be saved is to "believe" in Jesus. When we obscure that simple fact with altar calls, professions of faith, the repeating of the "sinner's prayer", etc, I think we may be confusing our children about the steps God has provided to be reconciled to Him. It is not that those things are bad; in fact a private and public profession of faith will be the very likely outcome of a child's conversion, but they are not the steps that save. Profession follows *after* salvation.

If your child has been following the story up to this point, it is essential you finish the presentation by asking them whether they want to place their trust in Jesus. You may point out that many people know the story of Jesus, but don't place their trust in Him and remain separated from God. Here's my suggestion: First, explain that God's plan to end our separation from Him is summed up in the Bible where it says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). I would open the Bible to John and show it to the child, pointing out the word "believes".

Ask, do you know what belief means? To believe means to know something will happen just because you trust the person who makes the promise. You don't have to touch or feel it; you just know it will happen. For example, when you drive to school, you "believe" that mom will be able to start the car, drive it to the school and drop you off at the right place. You don't have to do anything but ride in the car while she does the work. You don't look at the engine, or study a map or help her steer the car. You trust her to do all of that for you. You believe she will do it.

That is the same kind of belief you must have in Jesus. You know you have done some things that have been disobedient to God, and that those things have separated you from Him. But, you believe that God loved you so much that He sent His Son to take your punishment for you. When you believe that Jesus did that for you, and you are able to trust that His punishment took the place of yours, God welcomes you into a life together with Him. That step is belief. That

is all it takes to end the separation from God! There is no need to do anything else because God has provided Jesus for us as a free gift. You don't need to do anything else to have this promise from God except to accept the gift He has given you (Eph 2:8-9).

Now, you may want to talk to God about your new belief, and He wants to hear you tell Him about it. That is prayer. Although you have already done everything you need to do by believing, most kids are so excited they want to tell God about it. Do you want to pray? Would you like me to lead you? Here goes: God, I know I am a sinner and that I deserved to be separated from you, but I know that you loved me so much you sent Jesus to take my punishment for me. I know that Jesus died for me and I trust and believe that His death satisfied my punishment for sin. I trust Jesus as the one who saved me from death. Thank you for Him and for my life together with you. Amen.

Congratulations

If you've made it this far, thank the Holy Spirit for letting you participate in this divine opportunity. You have had a chance to witness the conversion of your child into a child of God. From this point forward, nothing will be able to pluck him or her from His hand (Rom 8:38). Well done and praise God!