

PRESERVING THE HARVEST:

Keeping Our Children in the Faith—Part One

By Philip Lancaster

So the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD which He had done for Israel...

When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel.

Judges 2:7, 10

One of the saddest facts of history is that godly men lose their children to the devil. The book of Judges records one such time. The Israelites had witnessed God's miraculous hand in the crossing of the Red Sea. Forty years later they crossed the Jordan River on dry ground and then saw God destroy Jericho and defeat the rest of their enemies as He gave them the Promised Land.

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But then we read the sad account above. One generation had an experiential encounter with the living God and walked with Him; the next generation heard the stories but had no direct experience of God, so they lost their faith.

Unfortunately, this problem is very much in evidence in recent generations of Christians. Over and over I have heard religious pollsters report that 70 percent or more of those raised in a Christian church are no longer members of a church once they reach adulthood. This issue has haunted me for over 35 years as I have watched the kids who attended church with me in my youth, and even my own siblings, abandon the faith of their childhood. This is so despite the fact that mine was a seemingly ideal Christian home, and my church was very Christ-centered and faithful to the Bible. My wife and I have spent countless hours even this past year ministering to Christian families who are distraught over the rebellion of children who are willing to cast aside the faith of their fathers.

Before looking at the factors that may be contributing to the defection of our children (which we will deal with in future issues), perhaps we need to ask ourselves if something is indeed wrong when our children do not follow in the footsteps of our faith and life. After all, why should we expect them to be Christians just because we are?

The reason I believe we are in fact dealing with a problem is that I

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believe the Bible tells us that the normal pattern would be for our children to embrace our Christian faith and life and pass that heritage on to their children after them.

God Works Through Families

According to the consistent testimony of the Bible, Old Testament and New, God works through families in spreading his salvation throughout the world. The Bible makes clear on virtually every page that God does not just deal with an individual as an individual; He deals with the individual as part of a family (and as part of a church and of a nation).

Don't misunderstand what we are saying. We are not denying that God deals very personally and individually with people. Jesus is indeed my "personal savior," to use a favorite expression of evangelical Christians, and this is a precious truth. But it is

noteworthy that this expression never appears in Scripture! It is instead a reflection of how the modern fixation on the individual has affected the church and its theology. The common Biblical language is that Jesus is the Savior of “the church,” of “His people,” of “the saints.” Read through the New Testament for yourself and see how many times salvation is spoken about in terms of its corporate, group dimension.

The story of Noah and the flood illustrates how God works through families. In Genesis 6:8-9 we read, “Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD... Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God.” For this reason God determined to save Noah. But notice who was saved in the ark. “But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall go into the ark - you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you” (6:18). Because Noah was a righteous man, his whole family was saved from the wrath of God in the flood.

When God entered into covenant with Abraham we find one of the clearest statements of family solidarity in all of Scripture: “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you” (Genesis 17:7). When God chose Abraham, He chose his descendants as well. The central covenant promise is that God will be our God and we will be His people (cf. Jeremiah 31:33; Revelation 21:3). God did not just call an individual, He called a people, and this people is formed in large part through the accumulation of the generations: God is the God of the parents, the children, the

grandchildren, and so on “for an everlasting covenant.”

This same idea is clearly stated in Isaiah 59:21: “As for Me,’ says the LORD, ‘this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the

“My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants,’ says the LORD, ‘from this time and forevermore.”

– **Isaiah 59:21**

mouth of your descendants’ descendants,’ says the LORD, ‘from this time and forevermore.’” This is nothing less than a promise that God will bless His people with salvation generation after generation. His salvation will flow through family channels over time “and forevermore.”

In The New Testament, Too

The New Testament is full of evidences that God continues to work through the generations of His people even now. Peter preached the gospel on the day of Pentecost and concluded by saying that the people should repent, be baptized, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Immediately he added, “For the promise is to you and to your children...” (Acts 2:39). What promise? The promise of salvation of which he spoke, evidenced by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This promise is “to you and to your children.”

Far from signaling some change marked by a new emphasis on individualism, this statement is perfectly consistent with the promise made to Abraham and confirmed so often before: God is the God of the generations of His people. God still works His salvation through families. Those Jews who heard Peter, steeped in the Old Testament emphasis on family solidarity in the covenant, would have needed a very clear word that God was abandoning His previous plan to call families to Himself, if indeed He were doing so. They heard instead words that showed that God still intended to be God to them and to their descendants.

This would explain why in every case where an identified head of household is baptized in the New Testament his whole family is baptized with him (cf. Acts 16:13-15, 29-34; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Whatever your view of baptism, it is evident that God is working through the family bond in the New Testament age. God calls families as He extends His salvation in the world, he does not

just call individuals.

A striking evidence of this is found in I Corinthians 7:14. Here Paul is discussing what a new believer should do if his or her spouse remains an unbeliever. Should he or she get a divorce? Paul's answer is "No." He says: "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy."

The believer should not divorce the unbeliever because the unbeliever is "sanctified" ("set apart," the root of the word "holy") by association with the believer. On what basis could Paul say such a thing? Obviously the unbeliever is not a Christian, so the sanctification he writes about is not salvation. But what is it then? The only possible explanation is that when God takes hold of one parent, the other family members come into the special sphere of God's gracious operation, such that, even though they are not believers, they can be described as "sanctified" or set apart from the world. Note, too, that the children of this couple are described as "holy." They, too, are set apart unto God, even though they, too, may not yet be believers.

This is how God works: He calls the parents (or just one of them) and claims the children as well. They belong to Him and He will work in them to be their God as He is the God of the parent(s). They don't just belong to Him when they believe; they belong to Him in some sense even before there is any faith. Now, we must stress that they will not be saved apart from personal faith, and in God's sovereign design some may not even come to faith, but since God has a special interest in them

we have reason for confidence that they will come to express faith in Christ as they grow up.

Now we can understand the significance of the promise given to parents in Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." The normal pattern is for the children of believers to follow in the faith and faithfulness of their parents. When instead they renounce the faith in words or

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actions, something is indeed wrong.

TURNING HEARTS

What is the secret to passing on the faith to our children and avoiding the outcome described in Judges 2? According to Scripture it is formation of a heart bond between fathers and their children. When fathers (and by implication, mothers as well) turn their hearts to their children and children to their

fathers, the children carry on the faith and God's kingdom marches forward in the world (Malachi 4:6; Luke 1:17).

Each generation may not have the opportunity to walk across the Jordan River on dry ground or see the walls of Jericho fall, but each generation nevertheless has the opportunity to experience the living God in a way that will preserve their faith. As fathers open their hearts, love and train their children, walk with God openly before their families, urge their children to follow the Lord with them—then the children come to experience the God of their fathers, not as memory and story only, but as living reality in their own lives. The parent-child heart channel becomes the means for each generation to have an encounter with God that assures their continuance in the faith.

As children come to walk with God as they walk with their parents, they will create their own history of divine encounters. Sin confessed, God's discipline received, forgiveness experienced, prayers answered, guidance gained from Scripture—all these create a personal history of God's dealing with the child that assure the genuineness, depth, and perseverance of his faith. The faith of the fathers becomes the faith of the next generation... and so on.

Next month we will look at specific ways we can win the hearts of our children so that they continue in the faith of their fathers.

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