The Bible: Imparting God’s Word to our Children
By Josh Mulvihill

We want our children to read God’s word daily and apply the truths to their life as it is the Scriptures that make our children wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15). Sadly, many of our children know more about the latest movies or music than they know about the Bible. They can quote line after line from a movie, but know little of God’s word. Just as our bodies are dependant upon air and water our heart is dependant upon the truths of Scripture for spiritual transformation. The Scriptures tell us that we are to “hide God’s word in our heart” (Ps. 119:11). If we are not teaching our children to do this, that void will be filled with other things—such as media.

God says “daily meditate” on his word (Ps. 1:2). Children will not learn how to study and meditate on the Bible without being taught. Parents are the primary educators in the life of their children. We teach our children how to catch a baseball, change oil on the car, or to be responsible around the house. How much more important is it to impart into our children a love for God’s word and an understanding how to use this precious book?

The following are suggestions to make that happen:

Begin the habit when children are young

Many parents make a false assumption that developing spiritual habits in a child’s life is something that cannot happen until they are older. There is no reason we must wait to teach our children to carve out time in their day to be with God. When children are as young as the toddler age, we can begin to teach them to spend time reading God’s word. Sitting a child down in a reading corner, on a blanket, or on the couch and training them to sit for five minutes and “read” the Bible is very doable. Children may not be able to read yet, but this should not be a deterrence. We should have a colorful, well-illustrated Bible that brings stories to life. If we are regularly reading the Bible to our child, they will be able to recognize the pictures and be reminded of the text. Habits are formed when children are young. Children are much more likely to develop and maintain habits in their middle and high school years that have been cemented in their life as a child.

Introduce your child to biblical basics

Psalm 71:17 is a mirror passage; children are to reflect in their adult years what they were taught as a youth. Psalm 71:17 says, “Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds.” What we are taught as children we internalized and it becomes the basis for worldview, ethics, convictions, and behaviors in our adult years.

Because of the trust a child has for their parent, they will believe anything the parent says. If a parent said that the sky was purple a child would believe this. If a parent teaches a child to delight in God, they will learn to find their joy in the Lord. We must capitalize
on the early years of our child’s life when they are open to the truths of God’s word. Beginning early in a child’s life parents should teach the following:

**The Gospel** – There is no more important message to understand in life than the gospel. The gospel is the good news because it addresses the most serious problem that humans have. R.C. Sproul summarizes this problem by saying, “God is holy and he is just, and I’m not.” The gospel in a nutshell; we have rebelled against a holy God that created us. God acted in Jesus to save us and we take hold of that salvation by repentance of sin through faith in Jesus. That’s good news. And that is the gospel. In relation to the gospel you should have a three-fold aim with your children: (1) clearly understand it, (2) concisely explain it, and (3) confidently proclaim it.

**Big Picture of the Bible** – The Bible is not a random collection of people or events. It is a unified whole with one main storyline pointing to, revolving around, and fulfilled in Jesus. There are four major parts of the Bible: creation (Genesis 1-2), fall (Genesis 3), redemption (Genesis 4-Revelation 20), and consummation (Revelation 21-22). As we read through the Old Testament we can help our children see how it points to Jesus and his covenant of salvation. For example, Jesus was the final Adam (Romans 5:12-21), the final prophet like Moses (Acts 3:22; 7:37), the final Israel (Matthew 4:1-11), the final high priest (Hebrews 7:23-24), the final Passover sacrifice (1 Corinthians 5:7), the final manna from heaven (John 6:31-32), the final suffering servant of Isaiah 53 (Mark 10:45), and the final Son of Man of Daniel 7 (Matthew 24:30). Jesus himself did this, “And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, he explained to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). Noah’s ark is about much more than cute animals getting on a boat and Noah obeying. David conquering Goliath is much more than bravery that helps a person overcome giants. Each person, each story, each episode ultimately is in the Bible so that God is glorified and this happens through the salvation and judgment of people. We should want to familiarize children with the main stories, people, and events of the Bible but not in such a manner that they are divorced from the overall storyline of Scripture. We should read and reread the stories of the Bible to our children. We should call our children to obedience in Jesus Christ and can use the heroes of the faith as models to imitate, but let our teaching not dissolve into moralistic teaching separated from the gospel. We should have a Bible that children can touch and read on their own. If its pages get ripped–that is okay. We can buy a new one.

**Doctrine** – Doctrine is simply a word to describe what the Bible teaches and no believer should be afraid to wrestle with. Paul challenges young Timothy to “Watch your life and your doctrine closely.” (1 Tim. 4:16) Every Christian needs to understand the core doctrines of the Christian faith in order to grow into men and women who have convictions to follow God. The author of the book of Hebrews was disturbed that his audience was not interested to grapple with the foundational truths of God or his word (Hebrews 5:11-14). He refers to them as babies in the faith who continually needed milk and could not handle the meat of God’s word. They needed to be fed because they could not feed themselves. This is not a statement we want made about our children, thus we must take seriously the task of teaching topics such as creation to counter evolution, the sanctity of marriage between one man and one woman to counter homosexuality, the
reality of heaven and hell to counter the claim that death is the end of all existence, the atoning work of Jesus to counter the claim that all religions lead to the same God, the Trinity, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the character of God, to name a few.

**Give your child a Bible**

Purchase a Bible for your child. Before giving it to them read through the Bible and underline or highlight passages that you want to emphasize to them. Make notations in the margins, write them short notes of encouragement and affirmation. Personalize a Bible for each child. Make a big deal about giving your child this valuable gift.

This idea came to me when my mom was dying of ALS. One afternoon my mom asked me what I wanted of her possessions to remember her by. My mom has expensive jewelry, money in an account–lots of things with worldly value. But as I thought about this question the thing I wanted most from my mother was her Bible. She had used this Bible for decades. It is marked up all over the place. Even though my mom is no longer with me, every time I open up her Bible I feel like she is speaking to me. We can all give this gift to our children.

Create a special ceremony around this momentous event. Choose a Bible that a child can use as they grow older. Don’t choose a child’s version of the Bible because this will become outdated. A good age to give this to a child is during their middle elementary years–between ages 7 and 9. Choose a readable version of the Bible. If our children cannot understand the Bible, it will not find its way into their heart.

**Read the Bible to your children and explain its meaning**

We should be in the habit of reading the Scripture to our children every day. The early morning and the evening provide two excellent windows for us to read the Scripture to our children. In the morning Jen and I read Psalms and Proverbs to our children. We choose passages based on what we are trying to strategically teach our children. Proverbs 10:1 was a favorite of ours when our children were learning to obey. Billy Graham once said that the Psalms teach us about God and the Proverbs teach us how to interact with humans. Both are important.

The evening hours, either at the dinner table, after dinner or before bed are ideal hours for extended time as a family reading God’s word. This article is not attempting to give the “how to’s for family devotions,” however, it is worth considering a few practical thoughts:

- Remember, they are children. The younger a child is the shorter their attention span will be. It has been said that it is a sin to bore a child with the Bible. Don’t expect your child to study the Bible like an adult. Try to keep your family reading concise and to the point, but meaningful. Ten minutes is a good amount of time to begin with.
- Familiarize yourself with what you are covering before sharing it with your children. If you are prepared you will know specific questions to ask and insights to share. A great resource is *The Long Story Short*. They do the work for you.
- Include children in the reading and discussion. This should not be a “mini-sermon” from you each day. Picture yourself as a facilitator of a small group, the conductor of a musical group, or maybe the ring-master of the circus. Your goal is to explain the Bible passage clearly and biblically, engage children in the process, and help our precious little ones apply the truths to their life.

If this is not a normal habit in your home, do not be discouraged by the child who complains, does not answer questions, or who tries to derail the time. Once the child learns that you are serious about reading the Bible on a daily basis they will get into the routine of listening and responding. It may take a few weeks in order for a child to learn that they are not going to persuade you to give up.

**Teach your child how to study the Bible**

When a child is very young they are dependent upon their parent for food. We must feed them. As children age, they begin to learn to feed themselves. There is a season where parent and child share the task of feeding the young person. But soon, the child is taught to feed herself. The primary responsibility is shifted from parent to child. The same mindset should be the goal for parents as it applies to studying the Bible. During the early years of a child’s life, the parent is the one to spiritually feed the child. But gradually this responsibility should be shifted to the child. In order for this to occur, parents must teach their child how to read the Bible. Basic Bible study methods that we should teach our children include observation, interpretation, and application. This is known as inductive bible study.

**Observation** – We are asking the question, “what does this passage say?” Observation is taking a close look at what is going on in the passage of Scripture. Correct observations are key to understanding the meaning of the text. We need to read the Bible thoroughly, slowly and prayerfully in order to understand what God is saying.

**Interpretation** – In this step we are asking, “what does this mean?” Interpretation is trying to understand the intent of the author. We are not asking, “What does this mean to me” as there is one correct interpretation. Interpretation is affected by the culture in which the author wrote, the biases we bring to the text, and the context in which the passage is found. We cannot understand a verse without understanding a chapter. We cannot understand a chapter without understanding the entire book. We may want to compare a passage with other Scripture or consult resources such as commentaries in order to best understand a passage.

**Application** – In this final step we are asking the question, “what does this passage require of me?” We come to the Bible for transformation, not simply information. We cannot come away from the Scriptures without being changed. God’s word has the authority to tell us how to live. Application includes understanding how the truths of
Scripture affect our behavior and putting into practice what we read and learn from the Bible.

Every child should understand how to use the following Bible study tools (these make great gifts to children):

*Commentaries* - A commentary simply explains the meaning and application of Scripture. Scripture can be difficult to understand. Scholars spend great amounts of time studying the Bible. They write about their discoveries in commentaries.

*Bible Dictionary* – A Bible dictionary lists items by theme. We can look up people, places, and themes of Scripture. A topical Bible is useful in teaching us about geographical locations such as the cities and cultures that the letters of Scripture are written too. We can quickly learn about important and obscure people of the Bible. We can also look up themes such as faith and learn more about the topic.

*Concordance* – A concordance is a catalog of the Bible. It lists every word by alphabetical order and tells us where we can find each word by listing references. It is extremely helpful if we want to study a specific word or can remember a word in a passage but cannot remember the reference.

*Bible Atlas* – A Bible atlas will teach us about the geography of the Bible, the location of cities, and the whereabouts of important happening of the Bible. For example, there is an Old Testament Jericho and a New Testament Jericho. This is helpful to understand. The Scripture writers purposefully write that Jesus walked up to a location. This is a geographical reference. It is helpful to know where a city is located in order to better understand a text.

For us to teach children how to study the Bible, we must know how to study it ourselves. We cannot teach our children what we do not know. If you do not know how to study the Bible, this must be a priority for you. Find a friend to teach you how. Contact a pastor and request to learn. Or, as Paul tells Timothy, “train yourself to be godly.” May Psalm 119:1-2 be true for our children, “Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord. Blessed are they who keep his statues and seek him with all their heart.”