

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Be Prepared: Preparation for children

Last week we looked at the subject of preparation for marriage. Today we are going to consider 'Preparation for Children'. I am very tempted to say, "Nothing can prepare you for having children, it is like nothing you have experienced before and you cannot even imagine the changes it will bring" and leave it there! Somehow though I don't think that would be very helpful, so I will try and come up with something more constructive. Indeed the Bible is very positive about children and contains a lot that will help us prepare for their arrival. I will break today's talk into three sections:

1. Things to do before children arrive
2. Things to be ready to do after children arrive.
3. Some dangers

Some of these sections are quite broad and I will subdivide them as we go along.

I should just say that much of what I am about to say is good advice for all believers, so please don't switch off if you are not a parent-to be! One other comment before I begin. I shall refer to some of the problems that will arise but it is important to keep hold of the fact that children are a positive blessing from God. Listen to Psalm 127:3-5, "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is His reward. 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".

1. Things to do before children arrive

I am going to split this section into two:

- 1.1 Preparing the internals
- 1.2 Preparing the externals

1.1 Preparing the internals

By this I mean getting yourself ready personally. It is a healthy thing to review your Christian growth and development regularly, especially if some major change is about to take place in your life.

Here is my 'pre-flight checklist' for all those expecting children:

a) Review your prayer life.

Is your commitment to prayer solid, regular and lively? If it is not now, it will not magically improve after you become a parent. Time will be tighter and you will be more tired. You really need this basic part of your Christian life in good shape before you become a mum or dad. You are going to need to ask for new wisdom and insight, greater levels of patience, more unselfish love, and a host of other things that it will take to make a good parent. Your only source of these things is God, and your only access to Him is by prayer. Most of us find it difficult to make adequate, regular time for prayer in our busy lives. Any new parent will tell you that life is about to get several orders of magnitude busier for you, so you need to have your prayer life in good shape in advance, or it may just disappear completely. If you have developed good prayer habits, you will already be bringing things to God in prayer as you go along with the details of your daily life. This is a habit that will be really helpful to you as a new parent. As you are regularly confronted with new challenges, and often at all times of the day and night, you will find it a great help if your automatic reaction is always to speak to God about things first.

I trust you are already praying for your child as part of its ante-natal care. Praying for good health for mother and child is quite right, but it is also a good time to begin the lifelong habit of praying for the best things for your children. Christians cannot define the best things as health, career, looks and popularity, or anything else confined to this world. God defines what is best in terms of understanding Himself and having a growing relationship with Him. You will want to begin praying that your child will learn to know the Lord Jesus from an early age and go on to be a man or woman fully committed to Christ. I have no reservations about praying for health and protection for my children but in the end I trust them to God. I would much rather He brought them to heaven after some difficulties and suffering in this life, if

necessary, than have them live happy, successful lives without Him, and ending in separation from Him. What we ask for in our prayers will reflect our real priorities for our children, so keep a check on what you habitually pray for.

b) Check your Bible study habits

Much of what I said about prayer applies equally to Bible study. Things will not get any easier and it is best to be in good shape to begin with. If you are praying for wisdom and guidance, God will find it hard to answer these prayers if you are not reading your Bible. As a Christian parent it will be your job to bring your children up “in the training and admonition of the Lord” Ephesians 6:4. This clearly means more than teaching them some Bible stories and explaining to them about Jesus and His love but it cannot mean less than this. I am not suggesting that a newborn baby will be asking lots of searching questions that you will need to search the scriptures to answer! However you will want to start speaking to your baby about the Lord right from the start and it is best to start with the truth. You will also be genuinely amazed at how quickly the time will run around and you will have a little one who *can* understand simple Bible truths, so you need to be able to explain things in a simple and clear way. You might be surprised how much understanding is required to make things simple and clear. Best start early!

c) Start family prayer and study times

Christian couples should have regular time together in prayer and Bible study, besides their personal quiet times. This will now help you pray together for your children and will form the pattern for family prayer and study times with the children as they grow. It is also a great example to growing children if they know that mum and dad meet with God every day. It shows you take what you tell them seriously yourself.

d) Think about how selfish you sometimes are

I know that sounds rather like an accusation, but we are all intrinsically very self-centred. I know I am anyway. One of the big adjustments needed in marriage is learning to consider another person's needs and sometimes having to put them first. The failure rates of marriage in this country show how hard many people find this. A new baby will show even the most considerate person that they have much to learn. Babies are not considerate or sensitive. They make unreasonable demands at unreasonable hours and usually fail to explain clearly what they want into the bargain! I don't want to paint a negative picture of parenthood, remember Psalm 127 I quoted at the beginning, children are a heritage and a reward, but it is best to face the fact in advance that your patience and self-sacrifice are about to be tested and stretched. Of course patience and self-sacrifice are virtues that God's word often exhorts us to display, for example Colossians 1:11, “Strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy” so you are about to get some lessons in spiritual maturity: be prepared!

1.2 Preparing the externals

If those are some of the things we can prepare for inside our hearts and minds, there are some external things that we need to look at as well. Here is another checklist.

a) Prepare your finances

The media like to publish reports every so often that claim that raising a child costs £250,000 on average, or some such unlikely figure. It is best not to take these things too seriously but it is inevitable that having a child will mean you are going to spend more money. Often you will be earning less at the same time, as mum stops work, for some time. The Bible is pretty clear that we ought to live within our means, so some adjustments are likely to be necessary. For the Christian this is a good opportunity to look at exactly what your priorities are. I am convinced that how we spend our time and our money show what we truly value. I can talk forever about my commitment to Christ, His people and His work but if this is not reflected in how I spend my time and money I am shown to be insincere. What can you spend less on? What is genuinely essential? I cannot answer those questions for your family but the answers will show where your heart really is. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” Matthew 6:21. Consider carefully and decide in a way that honours the Lord Jesus.

b) Prepare to go out less

I am sorry if I sound gloomy again but the fact is that little babies need lots of feeding, sleeping and cleaning and these will mean that you get to go out less. Try and get some help from grandparents, or others you can trust, so that you can still occasionally get out together as a couple. This is important for the health of your relationship. We husbands need to remember the exhortation in Ephesians 5:25 to love our wives. Also think through how you will both get out to sufficient Christian meetings when you have small children. My own experience of this was that things were not too bad in the first months because tiny babies can be carried around fairly easily in baby seats and will often sleep through meetings, with just the odd baby gurgle. This let my wife and me still get out to prayer meetings etc. together for a while. It was when the children got older and moved around and made more noise that things got

harder. I know in some churches it has been normal for mums to hardly get out to any meetings for many years while the children grow up. I don't believe this is healthy. All Christians need regular fellowship. Hebrews 10:25 says "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together" and that includes new mums. The arrival of crèches in many churches has made things a lot easier but you still need to plan things out to make sure that both mum and dad are getting the spiritual feeding that they need.

c) Prepare to be tired!

This is going to depend on just how quickly and how well your baby settles into a good sleep pattern but some sleep loss is inevitable. People say things they do not really mean when they are tired and some of us become rather grumpy. That is not an excuse for failing to live the Christian life, just a reminder to make allowances for your spouse's behaviour and not think your marriage is going seriously wrong if you find yourselves getting on each other's nerves a bit more than before. I think it is right to say though that we are more ourselves when we are too tired to put on a civilised front. If the character of the Lord Jesus is really being created in me by the Holy Spirit, and Galatians 4:19 speaks of Christ being formed in us, then it is more likely to be seen in my less guarded, tired moments. This is another good reason for the internal preparations I spoke about earlier.

d) Prepare a united front

The Bible has several examples of divided parents. Perhaps the best known is that of Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac favoured Esau and Rebekah's favourite was Jacob. No end of trouble resulted from this division. It's not favouritism I want to talk about but failing to speak and act as one. The Bible is quite clear that in marriage two become "one flesh" Genesis 2:24. This unity needs to be to the front in bringing up children. When children are a little older they are first class exponents of the 'divide and conquer' technique. Playing off dad against mum, and vice versa, is something that all children excel at. But unity needs to be practised a lot earlier. You need to decide as early as possible on issues such as how your children will be disciplined. You need to agree and act as one. There is nothing worse than two parents pulling in different directions. You may both start with different ideas on a number of subjects so you will need to discuss and pray about these together so that you reach an approach that you both agree is scriptural and you can then both apply equally. I like the example of Elizabeth and Zacharias in the naming of their son John. This was the name that the angel had said the child should be given, but when Elizabeth said this her neighbours and relatives went to her husband Zacharias for a second opinion. Zacharias' reply was beautifully simple, "His name is John". This led to his speech returning and great joy and wonder, but it came about because the two parents were in complete agreement about a part of God's plan for their child. You can read the account in Luke 1:57-66.

2. Things to be ready to do after children arrive

These are things that become more important as children grow but it is vital to consider them and plan for them early on.

a) Prepare to represent God faithfully

One of the most important things that parents do is represent God to their children. You will be telling your children that God loves them, that He is a Father in heaven and that He is a God who insists on what is right. To begin with their only patterns for understanding love, parental care and justice are you. We therefore need to be very careful how we live our daily lives and how we relate to our children. Fathers have a special responsibility to show the way that God's unconditional love and His perfect righteousness are expressed in His Fatherly care for us. Of course we will make a mess of this at times. We will need to confess this to God, and we also need to confess and apologise to our children at times when we misrepresent God in this way. We will not be punished like Moses, who was forbidden to go into the Promised Land when he misrepresented God when he struck the rock twice (Numbers 20:11), but we must be always careful about how we act. I am not suggesting putting on an act in front of the children. I am saying that we should genuinely live all the time, in the power of the Spirit, in ways that represent God faithfully.

b) Prepare to learn

God has a lot to teach us through our children. We have already thought that He will show us our selfishness. He will also teach us how to love even when it costs us a great deal. He might have to show us how we hurt Him by our disobedience and thoughtlessness by the way our children hurt us at times. He will also teach us the joy of a family relationship and why He wanted so much to make us His children. Be ready to learn.

c) Prepare to let go

My children are not yet at high school so I still have much to learn on this subject, but part of loving is letting go. God made us free to choose so that we could choose to love Him freely. That also made us free to make mistakes and suffer the consequences. Children sometimes have to be allowed to do the wrong thing so that they can learn the

consequences. It is best for them to learn early with small hurts that choosing your own way can be a bad idea! The story of Hannah and her son Samuel, found in 1 Samuel 1 and 2, is a quite remarkable lesson in trusting God and letting go. Having received a son after years of painful childlessness, as a direct answer to prayer, Hannah then gave the boy back to God. She did this by sending him to live with the high priest Eli. Eli was a dreadful father to his own two sons. Their behaviour was a disgrace to all Israel. Nevertheless Hannah trusted her precious son to this man, or rather she trusted him to the care of the God to whom she and the boy belonged. She learned to let go far earlier and far more abruptly than we have to and her faith is a great example to us.

3. Some dangers

There are some pitfalls that we can fall into as parents. Here are some things the Bible warns us to avoid.

a) Don't be totally absorbed by your children

Children are wonderful and occupy a very large amount of our time, energy and thoughts but, like all other things, we need to be careful not to make an idol of them. Only God deserves the first place in our hearts. When a Hebrew slave decided to stay a slave forever to avoid losing the wife and children that his master had given him, (Exodus 21:5) he had to declare "I love my master, my wife and my children". This order is not coincidental and reminds us that we are to love God, spouse and children in that order.

b) Don't forget to love your spouse

It is easy, perhaps especially for mums, to be so occupied with loving and taking care of children that our spouse gets a poor second best. As I have just said, that reverses the order of scripture and is something we need to be careful to avoid.

c) Don't stop going to church

I have already noted that having young children makes it harder to get out to church. Plan to make it possible. Do not use it as an excuse to ignore what we read earlier from Hebrews 10:25 about "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together".

d) Don't let the world take hold of you or your children

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul warns believers that marriage and children mean that we need to concentrate on serving others and are not so free to serve God. He was not saying that Christians should not marry and have children, but we need to be very careful that our need to earn money to feed and clothe our children does not lead us into being obsessed with material things or teaching our children to value goods above God. It is all too easy to teach our children the verse "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you", Matthew 6:33 and then totally undermine it by living a life where we seek after material things as a first priority and then fit in God's righteousness in any little space that is left over.

e) Avoid spoiling children

You will naturally love your children more than other people's. Do not let this lead you into unwisely or unfairly favouring them. The high priest Eli was condemned by God for honouring his sons more than God in 1 Samuel 2:29. David, although he was undoubtedly a great man of God, does not seem to have been a great father. The actions of Absalom and Adonijah suggest that he failed to properly discipline his sons and the consequences were serious.

Final encouragement

Jesus made time for little children when His disciples thought there were lots more important things to bother with. God has a special understanding of the heart of a parent. The God who designed families and promised to "set the solitary in families", Psalm 68:6, has a great concern in helping His children to fulfil their roles as parents. Go to Him regularly for help and wisdom, He has promised to provide both. He will teach you how to teach the little ones He is entrusting to your care.

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