



biblereading

WITH YOUR KIDS

a simple guide for every father

JON NIELSON

Bible Reading with Your Kids

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*For my parents, Niel and Kathleen, who read and taught
God's word to me. I am forever grateful.*

*And for David Helm, who leads his family and his
church according to God's good word.*

Introduction

IN 2011, MATTHIAS MEDIA published *One-to-One Bible Reading* by David Helm. I was working for David as he was writing this book, serving as the Director of Training for the Charles Simeon Trust in Chicago (an organization focused on equipping and training pastors in biblical exposition). I had a front-row seat to the formation of that book, and saw the way that a simple passion for reading the Bible one-to-one in the context of the local church had gripped David's heart. This was all taking place in his congregation long before he began to design this simple and practical manual for Christians.

But there was another aspect of David's commitment to Bible reading that gripped and shaped me during those years of service under his leadership (he was my pastor, as well as my boss). It was the way that he consistently, clearly and carefully read and explained the Bible every

night over dinner to his five children. In 2007-2008, as I dated my now-wife, became engaged, and prepared for marriage, the Helm family regularly invited us into their home for dinner. We would ‘sit in’ on normal week-night family dinners, after which the Scriptures would be opened, the word read, and the passages discussed. The discussions were sometimes serious and often full of laughter, as well as humorous insights from the kids. Most of all, the discussions were always fully participatory—David’s children were engaged with God’s word! The simplicity and profundity of these after-dinner times in God’s word have influenced me to this day, as I now am raising three young children of my own. I want them to know Jesus, by hearing and believing God’s word. I’m forever grateful for David’s example to me during those years around his table.

So, when Matthias Media approached me about writing a follow-up book to David’s *One-to-One Bible Reading*—a book that would be focused on helping fathers read the Bible with their children—I jumped at the opportunity. This was not least because of my relationship with David, and the significant impact of his example to me. But it was also because I’m now working hard at figuring out how to do this well with my own kids.

Christian fathers, this book is for you. Please receive this from a dad of young kids who does not claim to have yet ‘arrived’ in this discipline, but has become only more and more convinced of the foundational importance of exposing our kids daily to the powerful word of God. Is there any more fundamental and important calling that

we have as fathers? This is about pointing them to the only Saviour and Lord, by the surest means that God himself has provided for us.

This book is a simple, practical guide for reading God's word with your children. I offer this book to you humbly, praying that it will help you in this most important endeavour.

Jon Nielson

Part I
Why and
how

VERY FEW PEOPLE WOULD disagree that exercise is good for us, and that we should exercise regularly. Yet many people who'd agree with this statement would still fail to actually *do* regular physical exercise. For many people in need of more exercise, it takes something somewhat drastic—a foreboding word from a doctor, a surprising number on a scale, a disheartening lack of ‘fit’ from a familiar pair of pants—to jerk them into a realization that regular physical exercise *must* become part of their life.

I think it's often like that when it comes to the subject of this little book. Very few fathers in local churches today would disagree with the statement: “Fathers should read the Bible with their children”. That sounds like a very good thing, and a very godly commitment. Why, then, do so few Christian fathers seem to actually do this with regularity?

I would argue this is the case for two main reasons. First, Christian fathers have not yet been fully convinced that reading the Bible with their children *must* be done. Second, Christian fathers do not yet fully know *how* to read the Bible with their children as they grow. So it's the ‘why and how’ of this important task that I'll address in this first part of the book. In part II, I'll move on to give some very practical examples of what this can actually look like, based on my own experience of reading the Bible with young kids.

1 Theological foundations

A CHRISTIAN LEADER ONCE WROTE:

The education of children for God is the most important business done on earth... To it all politics, all war, all literature, all money-making, ought to be subordinated; and every parent especially ought to feel, every hour of the day, that, next to making [their] own calling and election sure, this is the end for which [they are] kept alive by God—this is [their] task on earth.¹

1 RL Dabney, *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, vol. 1, Sprinkle Publications, Harrisonburg, VA, 1994 (originally published 1892), pp. 676-677.

I really think most truly Christian fathers, who genuinely know and worship Jesus Christ, honestly do believe those words. If questioned about what is most important to them in all the world concerning their children, they would answer something along the lines of: “That they love Jesus and live faithfully for God”. The question for this first section of the book is... by what means will this happen? That is, what is the best and surest way that we, as fathers, can “educate children for God”, as the quotation above urges? My conviction, which I believe to be the clear teaching of Scripture, is that the surest path to salvation is steady and consistent exposure to the powerful word of God. To arrive at this conviction, we may need to be reminded about what a right view of the Bible actually looks like. What really is the Bible? What does God promise that it can—and will—do in the lives of our children?

First, the Bible truly is the *living word of God*. The apostle Paul declares that all Scripture is “breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3:16). The apostle Peter asserts that the prophets of old spoke and wrote as they were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21). He also identifies the writings of Paul as synonymous with Old Testament Scripture (2 Pet 3:16). What do these affirmations about Scripture mean for the way we read it, study it, receive it, and apply it? It means that we approach God’s word—the Bible—in a *fundamentally different* way from any other piece of literature we have ever before held in our

hands.² The Bible is different from the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Homer, or Shakespeare. The Bible is different even from books *about* God written by brilliant theologians. Why? Because the Bible, most basically, is *God speaking*. It is so true that the Bible is God’s living word that we can say, very confidently, that where the Bible speaks, God speaks.

It’s this conviction that will fuel our desire to put our children in contact with Scripture very regularly. They have a Creator—a God who made them, designed them, and who loves them dearly. And, he’s a Creator who longs to speak to them. It’s our responsibility to allow our children to begin hearing from their Maker from the earliest of ages. When we begin to really understand the Bible as the *living word of God*, we become enthusiastically committed to helping our children listen to it!

Second, the Bible is the *authoritative word of God*. Hopefully, as we raise our young children, we are helping them understand the structure of authority in the family. We are teaching them that one of the most immediate ways they live well is by submitting to our authority as their parents. They are called to obey us—to listen to our words, and abide by our instructions. Yet, there is an even greater authority to which they—and we—are called to submit: the authority of the Creator God and his word to

2 At the same time, we also need to recognize that we come to the Bible using many of the same reading skills with which we approach any piece of literature—skills which our young children may not have acquired at all yet or are only just beginning to learn and practise. I’ll have more to say about this later.

us. So we read the Bible to our children with a different tone, posture, and approach from that which we bring to any other children's story or picture book. We help them understand that we, as adults, sit under the authority of this word, just as they do. The words of this book define our lives just as they should define theirs.

Understanding the authority of God's word is part of what I sometimes call the 'pre-gospel'. Our children need to grasp this, even before they repent of sin and put their faith personally in Jesus Christ. What is this pre-gospel realization? It's the acknowledgement that they are creatures made by a Creator—he is God, and we are not. Because of this, the point of our lives becomes figuring out what the God who made us wants *from* and *for* us. Learning to sit under the authority of the word is part of responding to the Creator God in this way. It involves a recognition that our Maker has spoken with authority, and our first task as creatures is to listen to him.

Third, the Bible is the *powerful word of God*. We've talked about inspiration—the fact that the Bible really is “breathed out” by God as his very word (2 Tim 3:16). But that truth leads us to this next conviction... about the *power* of that word. Remember, we serve a God who *spoke* the entire universe into existence; his word has intrinsic creative and redemptive power. God's word is effective and powerful, unlike any of the words spoken by mere humans!

This means that his word—the Bible—is unlike any other piece of literature in *what it can accomplish* in the lives of those who read, listen to, understand and believe

it. This is what the author of Hebrews tells us about God's word:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

God's word is alive... and it is also "active"! Paul, too, writes of the effective power of God's word to actually *get things done* in the lives of people who expose themselves to it. He tells Timothy that "Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). God's word, according to Paul, is not only effective for bringing people to faith in Jesus, it is also the chosen and powerful tool of God for "teaching", spiritual "training", and even for causing believers to be "complete" in their faith—a state of being fully equipped for service to Jesus Christ. Clearly there is real power attributed to this book that we can hold in our hands!

Fourth, the Bible is *God's chosen method for salvation*. It is true that, in some cases, we see God using extraordinary means to draw people into a relationship with himself. The Bible gives us examples of dreams, visions, and angels—all used by God as extraordinary methods of calling people to obedience and faith. With that being said, though, the overwhelming pattern and expectation of Scripture is that exposure to God's life-giving word is

the *normal, expected, and God-ordained* means of calling sinners into a saving relationship with himself. Consider just a few passages that affirm this truth:

...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. (1 Pet 1:23)

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Rom 10:14-15)

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Rom 10:17)

...and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim 3:15)

Notice that in all of these verses, there is a clear and intentional link between God’s word (the preaching of it, knowledge of it, etc.) and salvation. God’s word is his regular and usual chosen means for bringing sinners to salvation, as his Spirit uses it to awaken dead hearts and souls and bring them to faith in Jesus. God’s *word* is God’s *way*. He delights to speak to people—from the earliest of ages—and invite them into a relationship with himself!

There's one more matter that we need to stop and discuss together at this point. It's the absolutely necessity of adding our *prayers* to the work of reading and teaching the Bible to our children. It would be possible, I suppose, to do everything 'right' in exposing our kids to God's word, and totally miss the absolutely necessary role of God *himself* in the entire process. Why must we lead with prayer? Why is it so necessary for us to bathe our Bible reading and teaching with our children in earnest pleas to God on their behalf?

- First, because salvation is always a miracle. Remember those familiar words from Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17-18: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is *from God...*" Anyone—man, woman, or child—who responds to the truths of God's word with repentance from sin and faith in God is experiencing something that is supernatural. It is a miracle; God gives faith to sinful people so that they become completely "new". All of our teaching, Bible reading, and pleading with our children can't force them to become new creations. The best we can do is bear witness to the God who can... and earnestly ask him to do a saving work in our sons and daughters.
- Second, because God responds to our prayers. This is not a book on prayer, so we don't have time to get into the theological intricacies of how prayer works. But it's safe to say that the model we see throughout Scripture and history is of God

moving in response to the prayers of his people. Now, we must always be careful not to seek to manipulate or control God; he will work and save in *his* way, and in *his* time. Yet, there is good precedent for God answering the prayers of his people, especially when they ask for things according to his will and heart (and the conversion and faith of little children certainly falls into this category!). We pray, trusting that God hears, and that he will answer in his time, and in his way.

- Third, consistent prayer to God for our children reminds us of his prominent and fundamental role in their lives. Of course we are witnesses, teachers, models, and guides. But he alone, by the power of the Holy Spirit, can change their hearts. When we pray for our kids—along with reading the Bible to them—we remind our own hearts that we are not fundamentally responsible for their conversion. That is God’s work, and so we make our earnest appeal to our Heavenly Father on their behalf—a Father who loves them far better than we ever could.

Do you really believe it?

So, the power of God’s word is immense. We’ve looked at just a few characteristics of Scripture, which should certainly get us excited about exposing our children to its power, even as we commit every step of the way to committing our work and witness to God in prayer.

Let me stop here then and ask you: Do you believe that all of this is true about the Bible? Again, do you *really* believe these claims about God’s word? Are you convicted that the Bible is God’s *living word*—inspired by the Holy Spirit himself, and so closely associated with God’s communication with us that we can say confidently that “where the Bible speaks, God speaks”? Do you really believe that the Bible is God’s *authoritative word*, under which you must call your children to sit, even more fundamentally than they sit under your authority as their father? Do you really believe that the Bible is God’s *powerful word*—able to grip the hearts of your children and awaken them to faith in Christ Jesus by the power of God’s Spirit? Do you really believe that God’s word is *his chosen method*—throughout every age—of bringing people to faith and moving them on in obedience? If you really believe these things, then your only conclusion must be that there is no better spiritual gift to offer your children than *steady and consistent and prayer-backed exposure to this word of God*. As Christian fathers, we must do this. And we must do it well.