

# Discipling Children



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Ps. 127:3–5; Deut. 6:6, 7; Luke 2:40–52; Matt. 18:1–6; 10–14; Mark 10:13–16.*

**Memory Text:** “‘Do you hear what these children are saying?’ they asked him. ‘Yes,’ replied Jesus, ‘have you never read, “From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise”?’ ” (*Matthew 21:16, NIV*).

**I**n our desire to preach to the world and to make disciples from every nation, we must not forget a whole class of people—children. Christian studies regarding children and youth differ about many things. Nevertheless, across denominational lines one thing seems consistent: the majority of Christians have committed their lives to Christ at a relatively young age. Fewer converts come from the older populace. Many churches apparently miss this important fact in their evangelistic planning, directing the greatest proportion of their resources toward the adult population. Christ's earliest disciples also seem to have underestimated the value of children's ministry. Jesus rejected that attitude and made room for children, even giving them priority.

Hence, we must do the same.

\* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 25.*

## The Hebrew Child's Advantage

Hebrew children enjoyed special treatment when compared with their ancient counterparts from surrounding nations. Child sacrifice as divine appeasement had permeated many cultures. Otherwise, children's value was often measured by their economic contributions to society. Work productivity, not intrinsic worth, defined their relationship with the adult world. It is painful to say that some of these attitudes, especially when it comes to economic worth, are found even in our present world. Truly, the day of wrath must come.

Evidently Israel's apostasy affected the population's estimate of children. Manasseh's dalliance with witchcraft and other national religions induced the sacrificing of his sons (*2 Chron. 33:6*). Nevertheless, Manasseh's reign was the exception rather than the rule; under more spiritual leadership, Israelites greatly valued their offspring.

**Read** Psalm 127:3–5; 128:3–6; Jeremiah 7:31; Deuteronomy 6:6, 7. What do these texts suggest about God's estimate of children? How might a proper understanding of Scripture affect our relationships with children?

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Education, birthright, and many other cultural practices clearly demonstrated how valuable children were in the ancient Hebrew culture. Not surprisingly, Christ expanded the already exalted position of children, as compared with surrounding cultures, to new dimensions. After all, children are human beings, and Christ's death was for every person, whatever their age—a point we should never forget.

**It's hard to believe that there are adults so corrupted, so evil, so degraded that they hurt children, sometimes even their own. How can we, in whatever situation we are in, do everything we can to love, protect, and nurture the children within our sphere of influence?**

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## Jesus' Childhood

Had Jesus bypassed childhood, arriving as a full-fledged adult on planet Earth, serious questions might be raised regarding His ability to identify with children. Christ, however, developed as all children must, skipping none of the developmental stages associated with growth and maturity. He understands teenage temptations. He underwent the frailties and insecurities of childhood. Christ encountered those challenges that, in their own sphere, all children face. His experiencing childhood was another crucial way in which our Savior revealed His true humanity.

**Read** Luke 2:40–52. What does this teach about Jesus' childhood?

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“Among the Jews the twelfth year was the dividing line between childhood and youth. On completing this year a Hebrew boy was called a son of the law, and also a son of God. He was given special opportunities for religious instruction, and was expected to participate in the sacred feasts and observances. It was in accordance with this custom that Jesus in His boyhood made the Passover visit to Jerusalem.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 75.

According to the texts, Jesus acquired wisdom. God bestowed grace on Him. From Christ's boyhood temple encounter during the Passover visit, we can see that Jesus had deep scriptural wisdom. Rabbinical teachers were markedly impressed by Jesus' questions and answers.

God surely used multiple childhood experiences to shape that attractively flawless character. Perhaps the discipline of learning carpentry skills, the attention of devoted parents, regular exposure to Scripture, and His interactions with Nazareth's townspeople formed the foundation of His early upbringing. In the end, however remarkable a child Jesus was, He had still been—as we all have been—a child.

**“The child Jesus did not receive instruction in the synagogue schools. His mother was His first human teacher. From her lips and from the scrolls of the prophets, He learned of heavenly things. The very words which He Himself had spoken to Moses for Israel He was now taught at His mother's knee.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 70. Dwell on the incredible implications of those words. What do they teach us about the humanity of Christ?**

## Healing the Children

**Read** the following passages: Matthew 9:18–26, Mark 7:24–30, Luke 9:37–43, John 4:46–54. Whose children were restored in these stories? How are these children’s backgrounds similar? What differences might you detect? What lessons can we learn from these texts that can help us today?

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In all these stories, one overwhelming similarity is that, in each case, a desperate parent came to Jesus, seeking help for a child. What parent cannot relate? What parent hasn’t felt pain, anguish, fear, and outright horror when a child was very sick, or even dying? For those who have been there, there’s nothing worse.

And though Jesus Himself had not been a parent, He related enough to them in His humanity that He healed their children. In each case, the healing came. He turned no one away. Thus, His love, not just for the parents but for the children, came through clearly.

Of course, this leads to a whole host of questions regarding cases when praying and pleading parents call out to Jesus and, yet, their children are not healed. There is, perhaps, no sadder experience than burying children. Death should be reserved for older generations. The unnatural order of parents mourning their children’s deaths makes the heart revolt. During these funerals, nearly every parent asks, “Shouldn’t it have been me?”

Mourning physical death and observing spiritual decay may be equally painful. How many parents have agonized about children overwhelmed by drug addiction, by pornography, or adolescent indifference? Whatever the affliction, we must learn to trust in the Lord and His goodness and love, even when things do not turn out so happily, as they did in the biblical stories listed above. Ellen G. White, a prophet, buried two children. Our world is a rough place. Our God, though, is a loving God, and that truth is what we must cling to, no matter what.

## A Fearsome Warning

**Analyze** the following texts: Matthew 11:25, 26; 18:1–6, 10–14. What truths, not just about children but about faith in general, can we learn through these stories? Think about just how harsh Jesus' warning was here. Why should we tremble before it?

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There exists a unique genuineness within children that Jesus frequently appealed to when illustrating His kingdom. Their genuineness, humility, dependency, and innocence somehow capture the essence of Christian living. We should all long for that simplicity and trust in living out our faith.

Modern disciple-makers need to learn another lesson: children need never leave their childlike dependency behind. Properly educated, children may carry their trusting innocence into adulthood. Certainly, as children mature and get older, they will question things, they will have struggles and doubts and unanswered questions, as we all do. But a childlike faith is never unfashionable. As parents, or as adults in general, we should do all that we can to instill in children a knowledge of God and His love, and nothing can do that more than by revealing that love to them through our lives, our kindness, our compassion, and our care. We can preach and sermonize all we want; in the end, as with adults, the best way to disciple children is to live out before them the love of God in our lives.

In cold, fearsome, and stark contrast, criminal acts against children—especially during church-sponsored activities—can destroy a child's confidence about the church and, usually, about the God of the church. What wrath must justly await those who perpetrate such actions and those who protect the perpetrators. Christ and His message awaken confidence and trust. How dare any human organization compromise that childlike faith through lack of vigilance?

**What is your church doing not only to nurture its children but to make sure that they are protected in every way possible? Think what it means when Jesus said their angels “do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 18:10). Why should that make anyone who hurts a child tremble?**

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## Suffer the Little Children

**Read** Mark 10:13–16. How does Christ’s acceptance of children facilitate their acceptance of Him? How should His rebuke of the disciples be understood? What must we take away from this account for ourselves and how we relate to children?

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Surely Christ’s disciples were well intentioned, although ignorant. They attempted to protect His valuable time, preserving His energy for more “important” matters. How greatly they misunderstood what Jesus wanted them to know.

Imagine being forsaken by gruff adults only to be embraced by the loving and caring personage of Jesus. No wonder children embraced Him. In this story, we have been left with an invaluable example regarding the ways in which children should be treated by those who profess to be disciple-makers.

“In the children who were brought in contact with Him, Jesus saw the men and women who should be heirs of His grace and subjects of His kingdom, and some of whom would become martyrs for His sake. He knew that these children would listen to Him and accept Him as their Redeemer far more readily than would grown-up people, many of whom were the worldly wise and hardhearted. In His teaching He came down to their level. He, the Majesty of heaven, did not disdain to answer their questions, and simplify His important lessons to meet their childish understanding. He planted in their minds the seeds of truth, which in after years would spring up, and bear fruit unto eternal life.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 512–515.

**How often have we met adults who suffer through so much pain, so much turmoil, so much heartache over things that happened to them in their childhood? What should this tell us about how gently, carefully, prayerfully, and lovingly we should treat children?**

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**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “Blessing the Children,” pp. 511–517; “The Temple Cleansed Again,” p. 592, in *The Desire of Ages*; “Baptism,” pp. 93–95, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6; “Bible Teaching and Study,” pp. 185, 186, in *Education*.

“It is still true that children are the most susceptible to the teachings of the gospel; their hearts are open to divine influences, and strong to retain the lessons received. The little children may be Christians, having an experience in accordance with their years. They need to be educated in spiritual things, and parents should give them every advantage, that they may form characters after the similitude of the character of Christ.

“Fathers and mothers should look upon their children as younger members of the Lord’s family, committed to them to educate for heaven. The lessons that we ourselves learn from Christ we should give to our children, as the young minds can receive them, little by little opening to them the beauty of the principles of heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 515.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why do you think it’s true that many who accept Christ do so when younger rather than when they are older? Skeptics could argue that it’s because they are too naive and ignorant to realize the silliness of what they are doing. On the other hand, could it be because they have yet to be so hardened and tainted with cynicism and skepticism as are many adults? That is, their innocence and openness make them more susceptible to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Discuss.
- 2 How can today’s church organize to become more Christlike in its appeal to children? What can each member personally do to be friendlier toward youth who may experiment with bizarre fashions, unusual musical tastes, and sometimes outlandish behavior? How can the church become more energetic, thus attracting active youth?
- 3 What steps may members take to prepare themselves to respond to interested youth who desire baptism and a life-changing commitment to Christ?
- 4 Dwell more on the attributes of children that caused Jesus to say “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (*Matt. 18:3*). What does that text mean? At the same time, what does that not mean?

## Jonathan's Wish

Jonathan is a quiet boy with a shy smile. He lives in a small village in southern Mexico.

One day his neighbor, Tia Maria, invited Jonathan to go to Sabbath School with her. Jonathan had never been to church before. His mother said he could go, so he agreed.

On Sabbath, Jonathan and Tia Maria walked to church. He liked Sabbath School, especially the mission story about children from far-away lands.

When he returned home, Jonathan told his mother what he learned. He told her the Bible stories and recited the Bible text. His mother listened with interest. But when Jonathan asked her to go to church with him, she said No. She said she had to work or take care of Jonathan's baby brother. Jonathan kept inviting her, but she kept saying No.

"Mama, Jesus wants you to come to church, and I want you to come," Jonathan pleaded. "All the other children sit with their parents, but I must sit alone." Still his mother refused to go.

When the pastor announced evangelistic meetings, Jonathan hurried home to invite his mother to go with him. To his surprise, she agreed to go. Every night Jonathan and his mother walked to the meetings together. And when the pastor asked those who wanted to follow God in baptism to stand, Jonathan stood. The pastor visited Jonathan's mother and explained that Jonathan wanted to be baptized. But his mother said that he could not be baptized, because she was not a member of the church.

Jonathan was disappointed, but he was determined to follow Jesus. He often talked to his mother about Jesus, pleading with her to give her heart to God.

She thought about how happy Jonathan was since he started attending church. And he loved to read his Bible lesson and sing. She wanted the same joy and decided to attend church with her son.

On Sabbath, Jonathan was surprised when his mother said she was going to church with him. They walked to the little church together. Jonathan showed his mother to her class. And during church Jonathan was glad that he didn't have to sit alone.

When the pastor announced an upcoming baptism, Jonathan again asked his mother to let him be baptized. This time she said Yes. Then she told the pastor that she wanted to be baptized too. Jonathan and his mother were baptized together.

Our mission offerings help introduce people such as Jonathan and his mother to Jesus. Thank you for sharing God's love through your mission offerings.