

Answering Your Kids' Toughest Questions



HELPING THEM UNDERSTAND
Loss, Sin, Tragedies, and Other Hard Topics

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To all the moms and dads
who are trying to reconcile
the heartache and
brokenness of this world
with what they know
about their loving God.

Elyse

To my gospel community:
Cody, Kei, Wayne, Keri, Mark,
Katie, Anthony, Phoenix, and Derek,
I couldn't have done this without you.
You all taught me what true community
looks like during the process of writing a book.

Jessica

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Introduction

Thank you for taking time to pick up this book and for loving your family the way you do. I know there are plenty of other demands on your time, and reading a book about answering your children's hard questions might not top the list, but your interest tells me that you want to help them as they face daily contradictions, depravity, and destruction around them.

You don't need me to tell you that we live in a world of great suffering and deep rebellion against God. This is the reality today—but it isn't all that different from the world children were born into two thousand years ago in Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome. In fact, in many ways our world isn't as bad as theirs. While we might not be happy about the direction our communities are headed, we do have laws that serve to protect many of us. So take courage. The words of Scripture that brought hope to our ancient brothers and sisters are the same words that can help us as we search for answers today.

Some Answers Before We Really Begin

This Isn't a Script

Although we will emphasize throughout this book that it is not to be used like a script, we want to underscore it here. The importance of knowing each of your children and how to talk to them in language they understand is crucial, especially when you're trying to answer difficult questions. So, while we will suggest ways to discuss each topic (for three different age groups), make sure to speak to your child in his or her own language. In addition, the Holy Spirit may guide your conversation in a completely different direction, and we want you to be open to this. *Again, this isn't a script.*

The Voice Who Will Be Speaking

In the chapters ahead, I (Jessica) will be doing the majority of the speaking. My mother, Elyse, will be helping me think through the tough questions and helping me present them to you. It is more than a little ironic that as I am writing a book on answering kids' questions, my mom is helping me.

Please know this book is not written from an "I have it all together" position, but rather from an "I'm in the same boat as you" perspective. Like you, I am a sinful, dreadfully flawed parent. Like you, I struggle with knowing when and how to talk to my kids about these tough topics. I fail to fight unbelief, and I worry that I don't communicate in an understandable way. I simply pray that you find this book helpful, and that no matter the topic, we parents are able to express Jesus' love for the broken and his beautiful rescue of sinners.

I believe that God is sovereign over everything, including the salvation of souls. I also believe the Bible is inerrant and sufficient: In everything it speaks to, it is correct, and it contains

all we need to know about how God loves us and how we are to love him.

My theology will come out in every question I address, but it is not my purpose to be provocative or pushy. So as you work through the different answers, I encourage you to ask yourself what you believe and, as always, to go to the Bible for further understanding and growth.

Each chapter will begin with a basic explanation of the biblical answer to the chapter's question. I'll use Scripture, metaphors, and stories from our lives to flesh out these explanations in a way that, hopefully, clarifies the answer for you, the parent. It's difficult to answer a child's questions—even in simplified, child-friendly language—without deeply understanding the answer ourselves.

From there, each chapter will provide example discussions you can have with your children at three age ranges: preschool, ages five to ten, and ages eleven and up. Finally, each chapter ends with a section called “In a Nutshell,” which summarizes the truths presented in the chapter. I have added these helps so that you can go to them when you're in a hurry and need a quick reminder of what the chapter covered.

My Desire for You

Although Christians may disagree on some points of theology, my desire is that every conversation reflects the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote, the gospel is of first importance (1 Corinthians 15:3). Our God loves us so much that he sent his one and only Son into the Enemy's camp to die for the very ones who hated him.

Jesus lived in our broken world. He understands the temptation to doubt God's goodness when there is so much sin around us. Christ himself was tempted in every way we are tempted

today, yet he did not sin. He lived the life we have been called to live; he died the death we deserved to die. He intercedes for us even now before his Father's throne. God is not some cosmic distant uncle who doesn't care about what happens to us on earth. Indeed, he is aware of every sparrow that falls to the ground (Matthew 10:29). He was and is intimately involved in every event in history. There was never a moment when he was not in control.

God's untamable love goes to the ends of the earth to pursue us sinners. This completely counterintuitive truth is the point of all of life. And because of his great heart, God's love for his children in Christ is the focal point of every discussion we encourage you to have with your kids.

Fellow parent, as you read this book I pray you have hope—hope that God is more powerful than all of our past mistakes, hope that God uses our weaknesses to glorify himself, and a deeper hope that he can speak over and through our faulty, muddled words.

One more thing: At the back of the book is a list of recommended resources for further study. The nature of this book doesn't allow extensive coverage of the topics, so if something piques your interest and you would like to know more, I encourage you to read these helpful books by authors I trust.

1

Parenting Is More Than Room and Board

Parenthood is such a strange thing. For many of us, it seems as though we had barely grown up and, before we knew it, helpless little strangers were relying on us for everything—their needs far exceeded having a place to live and food to eat. With smiles and gentle touches, we were the ones who brought comfort and order into their disordered and oh-so-confusing worlds. Time flew by, and soon *whys?* were coming from our little ones, often met by our own loss for words. *How did we end up on the receiving end of this little bundle full of questions?*

There is one thing you can count on as your children get older: They will have more questions than you will have answers. As Christian comedian Tim Hawkins recently tweeted,

Anyone who fields spiritual questions from a 7 year old deserves an honorary Masters in Theology. Wow.¹

How will you answer little Janie when she asks a difficult question? Are you like us, wondering all the time what you're supposed to say? *I'm the parent*, you think. *Aren't I supposed to have the answers?* And then, because you are a Christian, the problem is compounded: *Shouldn't my answers reflect a mature and consistent faith?*

We all know what it feels like to be asked questions we don't know how to answer. Sometimes we try to deflect:

Janie: Mom, what's a homosexual?

Mom: Look, dear, a giraffe.

Other times we make futile efforts to ignore:

Johnny: Daddy, why did Abraham have two wives?

Dad: [*Haunting silence followed by faking a call on his cell phone.*]

At still other times, we respond by blustering and playing the you're-too-young-to-know-that card:

Janie: Mom, why did God allow the devil to live?

Mom: When you're old enough to go to bed without my yelling at you AND when you're old enough to get up in the morning without my having to blow an air horn in your ear AND when you can make your own breakfast AND clean up afterward without complaining, THEN I'll answer that question.

Yes, it seems that we all need master's degrees in theology, not to mention way more patience, wisdom, and insight than Solomon. But the truth is, most of us are still in theological kindergarten. And I'm right there with you.

The alternative many of us choose is the fake-it-till-you-make-it route. We pretend we have all the answers, thinking that if we

can just be clever and use big words confidently enough, our children won't guess that we don't know what we're talking about. With just the right amount of smoke and precise placement of mirrors, we'll try to convince them that they should trust us and believe everything we say without question. And when the smoke starts to clear and the crack in the mirror shows up, we think that's the time to pump up the volume. After all, if we're really passionate and convincing in our arguments, our children will find it easy to believe us. There's one problem, though: Most children, like adults, have an innate capacity to see through smoke and mirrors.

We Do Not Have All the Answers . . . and That's Okay

Let's get real. The truth is, no matter how much we pray or study, none of us, not even those of us with real theological degrees, have all the answers. We all struggle with what's known as the noetic effect of sin, which means our ability to know and understand truth is broken, in the same way our bodies are broken. Our thought processes have been affected by sin, too. We simply can't understand deep truth.

But that's not our only problem. We have our own doubts and fears. When we hear about the failure of a friend's marriage or read about a tsunami somewhere in the world, we can wonder if there really is a God who is overseeing this mess—and if he is there, why isn't he doing something about it? We scratch our heads and wonder *why?* just like our children do.

We try to make sense of the Bible, but then we come across stories that are out-and-out strange, or thorny topics that are difficult to understand even as an adult with a well-defined worldview. We try to trust the character of God and what he says about the world around us, but at times it seems to conflict

with what we see on the news, in our neighbors' lives, or even in our own hearts. It's so easy to wonder if our lack of faith or confidence about certain biblical matters will harm our children.

It might be hard to believe, but all of this is okay. Quite simply, we are called to walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Yes, it can be disheartening and even frightening when we don't have the answers or the words to explain the truth we know. But as David expressed, God can be trusted:

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.

Psalm 56:3–4

In the past, when my kids asked me questions I couldn't answer, my fear was based on a wrong assumption—that their understanding of God and even their ultimate salvation depended upon my ability to make sense of all the brokenness in the world. I'm thankful that now I truly understand that as good as it is to have answers and to seek to be prepared to speak to my children about my beliefs, their ultimate salvation isn't up to me.

No, the salvation of souls depends on the Lord alone (Psalm 3:8; Jonah 2:9; John 1:12). Our children's salvation is not dependent on the strength of our faith or the shrewdness of our answers. Of course, we are called to bring our children up in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4), but our response to this command may or may not be determinative in our children's salvation. Think of it: None of the Gentile believers who came to faith in the early years of the church had been raised in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. They had been raised in Greek philosophy. In fact, even the Jewish Christians, who had been raised in the law of Moses, had to be saved by a sovereign act of the Holy Spirit in their hearts . . .

just like us. Yes, we are to have answers, but no (thankfully!), our answers will not save our children.

We are commanded to train our children—to teach them how to understand and apply truth, even if they resist it (Proverbs 22:6; Deuteronomy 6:7). My parents worked hard to help my brothers and me learn to discern truth from error. For instance, when I was about fifteen, I remember coming home from a movie and finding my mother waiting for me. I admit I was annoyed because I knew what was coming. She was going to challenge me to think about what I had seen and whether the message of the movie was true or false. I remember sitting with her and whining, “It was just a movie, Mom! Do you have to analyze *everything*?” But now I find myself asking my children about movies they see and trying to help them think about truth and error. I want to guide them, to help them discern the difference between what’s real and fake. I want them to know that there is only one basis for truth—one rule by which all of life is to be judged. God has given us the Bible, our standard to judge all of life by. And every movie, every conversation, every book, every thought is to be brought into line with what God has told us about the world he created. I want my children to have these answers, whether they are the answers they want or not, whether they make perfect sense to them, or whether they seem strange and completely antithetical to everything they hear from their friends.

There Is True Truth

I want my children to know that truth is outside of them; it doesn’t originate with them. It is not subjective or based on thoughts or feelings. There actually is what evangelical Christian theologian Francis Schaeffer used to call “true truth,” a truth

that transcends what our feelings or our culture or environment tells us is right and wrong, true or false. We live in a world that has been built upon the lie that there is no such thing as objective truth, that what is true for one person may not be true for everyone else. Of course, that statement—there is no truth to be known—is, in itself, a truth statement. And it is false.

Into this subjective world of ever-altering “truths,” the Bible stands as a fortress of infallible, unchanging truth. And it is more than a rulebook, more than a list of do’s and don’ts. The Bible is God’s love letter to his children through which we learn how to interpret and interact with the world around us, and through which we find salvation.

You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for “all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

1 Peter 1:23–25

Yes, we look to the Bible as the guide we need. We seek to understand its meaning, and then we stand in faith that God’s Word is true truth. We strive to teach our children to know what it says and teach them all about the good news of the Rescuer who calls himself the truth (John 14:6), and then we rest and pray and wait for that good, “imperishable” seed to take root and grow.

This Truth Will Set You Free

John 6:63 offers so much freedom: “It is the Spirit who gives life.” Knowing it is the Holy Spirit’s work (not ours) to regenerate

hearts frees us to pray that he would work powerfully through both our weaknesses and our strengths. We can seek God for our children, both in extended times of prayer and also in little whispers within our hearts when we sense an opportunity for conversation.

Knowing that salvation is God's work alone should also free us from fear. We no longer have to fear that everything is riding on what we say—that we might miss that “one” opportunity to speak into our children's lives and have their eternal salvation forfeited. Instead, we should feel the freedom to tell them, “I'm not sure . . . let me pray (or think or do some research) on that, and I'll get back to you.”

Not being willing to admit that we do not have all the answers actually demonstrates a pride that will get between us and our children. Pretending to be all-knowing makes us seem unapproachable and hypocritical. And while that may cut down on the number of questions we will have to answer, it certainly won't build a relationship. Freedom from fear means we can admit we were wrong, we didn't understand an issue, or we answered in haste.

Freed from fear, we won't need to try to avoid our children's questions. And because we are commanded to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), we should be asking the Lord for grace and wisdom when we answer. We need wisdom to know how to speak to them in age-appropriate ways. We also need to know them well enough that we are aware of their emotional and spiritual states.

The Rocky Road Ahead

Our children will have questions about what they hear in church or read in the Bible. They will want to know about sin, death,

hell, heaven, and the angels. They will also have questions about what they see in the world around them. They'll want to know what rape, incest, homosexuality, and abuse are. They will wonder about natural disasters that bring death and destruction on seemingly innocent people without any obvious purpose. They will want to know why the Bible has such strange stories in it—stories that seem to promote marrying more than one woman, having sex with hundreds of women, crucifying an innocent man, destroying entire cities because of sin, and much more. And they will want to know how God could insist that he's both good and in control of all of this mess.

The questions we'll be discussing in this book are difficult. But even when we feel ill prepared and unsure, we should still attempt the conversation. Perhaps in this weak act of faith and love, we will find the wisdom we need. Perhaps the Lord will open our understanding and give us words to say. Or, he may not. But even at those times, we can trust him. We can trust him because he is good, he is wise, and he is loving.

For it is you who light my lamp;
the Lord my God lightens my darkness.
For by you I can run against a troop,
and by my God I can leap over a wall.
This God—his way is perfect;
the word of the Lord proves true;
he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.

Psalm 18:28–30