



# LITTLE HABITS,

HOW SIMPLE PRACTICES HELP YOUR FAMILY GROW IN JESUS

# BIG FAITH

 CHRISTIE THOMAS 

When my children were young, it all felt so overwhelming, like I had to do *everything* right or make HUGE, drastic changes to be more “holy” to make my sons grow into the men of God I dreamed they would be. That’s a lot of pressure for one mom to carry, and I don’t think God intended it to be that way. I’m so grateful to Christie for breaking it down for us into smaller pieces that when put together help point our families to Jesus.

**BROOKE MCGLOTHLIN**, founder of Million Praying Moms and host of the *Everyday Prayers with Million Praying Moms* podcast

As always, Christie is insightful, helpful, and encouraging. If you’re a Christian parent, you can’t go wrong with *Little Habits, Big Faith!*

**RYAN COATNEY**, founder of Cross Formed Kids and pastor of Grace Story Church

No matter your level of experience with family discipleship or the age of your children, this book will help you build even better discipleship habits. After establishing the value of the parent’s role, Christie Thomas shows parents—step-by-step—how to leave behind legalism and nurture their children into joy-filled faith. Short, thorough, and practical, this book is a reliable primer for someone who wants to learn how to disciple their children.

**ELIZABETH SANTELMANN**, host of the *Sunshine in My Nest* podcast

Christie is one of the most trusted and honest thought leaders in family ministry. In her latest offering, you’ll find a nonanxious, down-to-earth conversation partner for this stretch of the road known as parenting. This book is highly practical while carefully steering away from being a manual for how things must be done. I can’t wait to recommend this grace-filled, hopeful book to parents for years to come!

**CHRIS AMMEN**, founder of Kaleidoscope

Finally, a parenting book that I’m excited about! Christie Thomas offers a step-by-step guide to passing on the faith that feels not only doable but fun. Her witty charm and personal storytelling will make parents feel seen, understood, and inspired to establish family rhythms of faith in bite-sized portions. If you’ve felt overwhelmed by the pressure to do “all the things,” be encouraged: *Little Habits, Big Faith* was written for you.

**MICHELLE REYES, PhD**, professor of cultural engagement at Wheaton College and award-winning author of *Becoming All Things*

Christie Thomas has written a highly readable and doable guide to cultivating faith in the next generation of children. Without being legalistic or formulaic, she plots out a highly organic pathway of habits that guides both parents and children. She is realistic with the problems parents encounter yet offers good resources and a lot of hope for the discouraged. She concludes chapters with testimonials from others and concludes her book with some valuable resources for follow-up. I wish this had been available in my parenting years, but it is also useful for grandparents to tap into.

DON HARDER, MA, retired pastor and superintendent, Evangelical Free Church of Canada

If you love God and his Word, you ache to raise kids who do too. Yet this task can feel overwhelming, and the results may seem uncertain. Christie Thomas is someone I trust to provide parents with everything they need to communicate biblical principles to their kids in warm and inviting ways. *Little Habits, Big Faith* will give you a good start on this process and a hand to hold along the journey. Christie's experience in children's ministry and parenting spills over into this beautiful book. Learn from her, and apply what you learn. Nothing could be more important!

MONICA SWANSON, author of *Boy Mom* and *Raising Amazing* and host of *The Monica Swanson Podcast*

Doable! *Little Habits, Big Faith* offers parents a practical, relatable, and easily applicable approach to discipling their children. Author Christie Thomas understands that one size does not fit all. The strategies she suggests can be uniquely tailored to any family. This book will assist you in partnering with God to intentionally grow big faith in your kids through making small yet impactful adjustments. With Christie's guidance, you can do it!

LORI WILDENBERG, licensed parent and family educator and author of six parenting books, including *The Messy Life of Parenting: Powerful and Practical Ways to Strengthen Family Connections*

Every family needs this book! Christie is so good at taking big, overwhelming concepts and breaking them down so parents can implement faith habits in everyday life. I own every one of Christie's

books, and I'm so delighted with the insight and practical wisdom in *Little Habits, Big Faith*.

ERICKA ANDERSEN, author of *Reason to Return: Why Women Need the Church and the Church Needs Women*

So often in parenting and discipling our kids, we get in our own way and we worry about teaching all the right things or we focus on our limitations. In *Little Habits, Big Faith*, Christie reminds us that faith development happens in relationships and encourages us that we are not alone in any of the struggles we go through as we raise our kids to know and love Jesus. But instead of a long list of to-dos, Christie offers us simple habits that only take thirty seconds and will change our family's faith. I promise you will not finish this book feeling overwhelmed, unequipped, or discouraged. You will finish this book feeling confident that little by little, moment by moment, you *can* help your kids develop a meaningful and deep faith in Jesus that will last a lifetime.

STEPH THURLING, coauthor of *Raising Prayerful Kids*, executive director of Christian Parenting, and host of *The Christian Parenting Podcast*

If you're exhausted from Christian parenting approaches that make you feel like you have to "get it right," *Little Habits, Big Faith* will refresh your weary soul. Christie Thomas offers us a better way to disciple and build foundations of faith with our children. Demonstrating the freedom to custom-fit Christian parenting to our own unique families, Christie shows how to weave faith into the everyday, small moments of life. *Little Habits, Big Faith* shows parents how they can have peace in the process of training their children in the Lord and focus on the part of discipleship that matters most—knowing and loving Jesus.

TERI MCKINLEY, coauthor of the bestselling book *Our Daily Bread for Kids*

In *Little Habits, Big Faith*, Christie applies the science of habits to faith formation in a way that makes family discipleship feel easy, doable, and sustainable for every family, all while sharing encouragement and support. *Little Habits, Big Faith* addresses common roadblocks to family discipleship and shares perspective shifts and next steps for overcoming those struggles. Christie gives us a starting place for simple but effective family discipleship and then walks us deeper into guiding

our kids to own their faith so discipleship becomes a lifelong journey for the entire family.

BRITTANY NELSON, author of *Time to Update: 7 Areas to Integrate Digital Discipleship into Your Children's Ministry Strategy* and creator of DeeperKidMin.com

This is the book every Christian parent needs to read. I was shouting “Amen!” after practically every sentence. Christie is relatable, honest, and helpful—the perfect guide to any modern, busy, slightly chaotic Christian parent who desires to disciple their kids. *Little Habits, Big Faith* manages to be down-to-earth about the realities of family life while also being aspirational about how we can journey toward Jesus together. There’s not a single word here that didn’t encourage me that I, too, could start small and grow big faith. Thank you, Christie—this is the family discipleship guide we all need in the 2020s.

LUCY RYCROFT, author, ministry lead at Parenting for Faith, and blogger at The Hope-Filled Family

In *Little Habits, Big Faith*, Christie Thomas reminds us that it’s never too late to start small! This book is full of grace, gospel centered, and *deeply* practical. Using a biblically and psychologically informed approach to discipleship and habit formation, this work manages to provide detailed and specific guidance without being formulaic. Christie affirms the uniqueness of each family and structures *Little Habits, Big Faith* to help parents discern how to approach their children’s spiritual formation in a way that is sustainable and life-giving. This encouraging and gentle resource is sure to bless Christian parents raising children of all ages.

DANIELLE HITCHEN, author of *Sacred Seasons* and the Baby Believer series

I want to buy a copy of this book for every parent I know! This book helps you understand the *why* behind raising your kids to know and love Jesus. It puts a fire in your bones and a passion in your heart to prioritize what matters most as you parent, but it also practically lays out how to make it happen in a way that is simple and will work for your unique family. Christie addresses the fears, roadblocks, and unrealistic expectations we come across as parents and helps us pray, confess, and start smaller so that our little habits can change the way we live! This is a powerful handbook to guide you as you bless, pray

for, connect with, and disciple your kids. This is one I want to revisit again and again as I parent. I love all her ideas for little steps that lead to big, life-changing family habits.

SARAH HOLMSTROM, coauthor of *Raising Prayerful Kids*

No family functions the same as another. *Little Habits, Big Faith* allows for this fact and so much more. With realistic goals and ideas for how you can create a vision for your family, Christie gently leads you on a journey that makes discipleship feel possible and sustainable.

REBECCA RUYBALID STONE, author of *Discipleship for Kids: Helping Children Grow in Christ*

Dive into *Little Habits, Big Faith* and unlock a treasure trove of wisdom! Christie Thomas seamlessly weaves together research and personal experiences, offering parents and caregivers a road map to nurturing faith in children. With a straightforward three-step process, Thomas tackles the common stresses and insecurities of parenthood, providing practical solutions that promise growth not only for kids but for the entire family. This book is a must-read for anyone seeking to cultivate a thriving, faith-filled environment at home.

TERESA ROBERTS, DMIN, professor and author of *Raising Disciples: Guiding Your Kids into a Faith of Their Own*

As a pastor and father, I see challenges that result when families neglect to have a rule of life, the discerned and decided ways that we commit to following Jesus in our families. Through *Little Habits, Big Faith*, Christie Thomas not only addresses why we need a vision of faith in our families but also offers an encouraging and practical guide for how we, as parents, can kneel down into the soil and partner with God in the garden work already happening in the hearts of our children. Every parent will find something helpful and spiritually relevant for their family in *Little Habits, Big Faith*.

CRIS HARPER, lead pastor of Bethel Community Church





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CHRISTIE THOMAS

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*To the women of HopeGrown Faith:  
You are the reason I'm brave enough to write for adults.*



*As you tend the little and big ones in your care,  
may you remain connected to the Vine,  
allowing the Gardener to prune  
so your life becomes a place  
where the little habits  
lead to deep roots  
and big fruit,  
for God's  
glory.*

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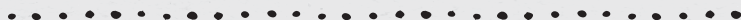
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## Introduction

# A VERY GOOD PLACE TO START

MY SON AND I ARE CURLED UP in the top bunk, surrounded by piles of stuffed animals and books, doing our bedtime routine. As we sing our memory verse together, he leans toward my ear and bats his eyelashes. (He thinks it's hilarious, but I feel like there's a moth in my ear. Ew.)

When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

TITUS 3:4-7, NIV

There are some awfully big words in that verse, I realize. What does *justified* mean, anyway? I decide to explain: “*Justified* means that God doesn’t see our sins anymore; he sees us through Jesus. That’s what it means to be saved.” And then I say, “Do you know what you need to do to be saved? Just say, ‘Jesus, I want to be saved!’”

I’m chuckling inside at my simple explanation, but he takes it seriously. A second later, he tells me, “I just said that to Jesus, in my head!” He giggles, and I notice a new brightness in his eyes. For the first time—without pushing or prompting or pressure—he has made a personal profession of faith.\* He wants to follow Jesus. I give him a squishy cry-hug, and he pats my back in amusement.

Life-changing moments with our kids can come out of simple habits. Tiny, intentional practices have helped me pay attention to the organic moments when God has been nudging me to take the conversation one step further. Would my son’s lightbulb realization have happened without our regular rhythm of singing a bedtime verse together? Would I have noticed the opportunity to take that thirty-second habit one step further if I hadn’t seen what God had done in other small moments of intentionality? Maybe. God can do anything he wants. But I believe that God used my stumbling faithfulness and a simple bedtime habit to bring my son into a true relationship with him.

And it all began with starting little.

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\* What is salvation? It involves (a) recognizing that we need saving because our sins separate us from God and (b) believing that the Savior we need is Jesus. “If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced’” (Romans 10:9-11).

## TWO TEAMS

Wondering what it looks like to start little—and how that’s any different from the try-harder, do-all-the-things faith development you’re used to hearing about?

Let’s play a game. Imagine you’re watching the end credits of a VeggieTales show with your kids when suddenly Bob the Tomato bounces onto the screen and says, “Hey, parents! Want to win an all-expenses-paid trip to a destination of your choice? This prize goes to the first family who gets into a habit of reading the Bible together every day!” (If you’re not familiar with Bob and his fellow animated preaching produce, these characters have been teaching kids truths about the Bible since I was a teenager. Some of their silly songs are permanently in the soundtrack of my high school memories.)

What would you do in response to that challenge?

Option one is to join the all-out team. If you’re following the method this team uses, you might

- hop online and order three new devotional books, hoping to find the right fit for your kids;
- hustle harder in the mornings, hoping to have time to read a devotion to your kids; and
- ask your kids ten times to sit and listen quietly at bedtime, until one of them starts rolling around on the floor and the teenager is rolling his eyes.

On the all-out team, we’re working our butts off to keep kids engaged, but nothing seems to hold their attention. This method tends to leave us stressed and frustrated because they don’t seem interested or aren’t grasping the concepts. We lose

steam because we don't want to push our kids away by shoving something down their throats. Occasionally we work up the energy to get going again because we know it's important, but it's tough to stay motivated because we keep receiving the same poor response from our kids.

The other approach? Step on over to the bit-by-bit team. If you're following the method this team uses, you might

- not start right away, but instead stop to pray about the best time and place to start a habit;
- choose a short, engaging passage from the Bible to begin with; and
- give your kids time and space to wiggle and interact with the Bible in their own way so everyone feels like they enjoyed the time together.

On the bit-by-bit team, you can hop off the guilt-ridden hamster wheel and live in freedom, knowing that you're fulfilling your calling to share your faith with your family without having to know it all or do it all.

And if you haven't joined a team yet and aren't sure if you need to do anything more than expose your children to church? Leaning into bit-by-bit changes can help you nix the fear that you'll manipulate them into faith. You can grow an open, positive relationship with your children while slowly helping them weave an authentic, Christ-centered faith.

Here's the thing: Most of us long for our kids to have a real, lifelong relationship with God. We don't need a talking tomato to offer us free trips as motivation, but we do wonder if we're doing enough, if we're doing it right, and how to move toward our goal of helping our kids connect more deeply with Jesus.

As I've tried to share my Christian faith with my kids, I've spent a lot of time on the all-out team. I might have even been the captain for a while.

When I began having kids, I read endless numbers of parenting books and family faith—development blogs, but eventually all that just made me want to back away and rock in a corner. I was so tired of being told I had to do all the things to be a “good Christian mom.” Was I really failing if I didn't hold regular worship sessions with my kids and say in-depth prayers and read chapters of the Bible and memorize a verse a week and know the answers to every theological question and have my kids do workbook-style Bible studies? (I'm exhausted just writing that sentence.) And since I couldn't do all the things, was I messing up my boys for eternity?

Each book I read made me feel more and more overwhelmed. But simply shrugging off the guilt and not doing anything wasn't an option. I wanted to do *something*—but what could I do that was attainable . . . and still helped me and my kids grow more toward Christ? I knew there had to be a better way.

## SMALL HABITS, POWERFUL CHANGES

Where I live, in the North Pole (kidding . . . sort of), we joke that we only have two seasons: winter and construction—otherwise known as “the making of the potholes” and “the fixing of the potholes.” Through autumn, winter, and spring, small amounts of melted snow find their way into microscopic cracks in the road. Every time the temperature falls below freezing, that water turns into ice. If you've ever put a glass container of soup in the freezer, you know what happens when water turns to ice: It

expands. Soup freezing in a too-small container can break glass, and water freezing in those cracks in the road can break asphalt. After eight months of the thaw-freeze-thaw-freeze cycle, you end up with huge potholes and cracks in the road.

When I finally admitted that my all-out method of family faith wasn't working, here's what God began to show me: Just as a few dribbles of water have the power to crack open a solid road, small but consistent choices have the power to crack into a busy routine and change the terrain of my family's faith.

If you're feeling weighed down and exhausted by all the things you're supposed to do to teach your children about God, I invite you to join me on the bit-by-bit team, whose methods we'll discover in this book. We're going to look at why our investment matters, what hasn't been working, and why we're feeling stuck. And then we're going to explore the way through: a simple process to establish family rhythms of faith and equip kids to grow a faith of their own called the Faith Growth Cycle. As we walk this path, we're going to discover the power of small, consistent choices: attainable, life-giving daily habits God can use to change how your family grows in faith.

This is a parenting book for people who don't like formulas. I will give you many ideas for how to invest in your kids' faith development, but you won't find copy-and-paste approaches here. I won't tell you to homeschool, homestead, or be a homemaker, though there's nothing wrong with any of those choices. Instead, I hope to help you sit at the feet of Jesus, along with your family, and learn what *he* wants for your unique family. Jesus is the only way to salvation, but the way each family faithfully follows him is going to look different, unique to the people, personalities, and positions God has given them. We're going to be exploring the *how* of spiritual formation so you're

equipped to create the habits the Holy Spirit wants for you, instead of replicating someone else's plan.

*This book is for you if*

- a. you want to read the Bible (or engage in any kind of faith-formation activity) with your kids in a way that clicks with them and doesn't make you want to pull your hair out;
- b. you want to find consistent times to talk about faith with your kids without adding to your overflowing to-do list; and
- c. you want your kids to trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Nothing we do will guarantee our kids will choose to follow Christ for their whole lives—that's a choice they will each make on their own. We can't give our children a new heart, but Jesus is in the business of making hearts new. We can be faithful to introduce our kids to Jesus *and* trust him to do his work.

In the end, this book isn't about our kids. It's about *us*. It's about being confident in our calling as our kids' spiritual leaders. It's about trusting the process, trusting God, and growing along with the kids we love. Our job is to point to Christ, and this process will equip us to do that job consistently and confidently. We want to cultivate and nourish the soil of our children's hearts so they are receptive to the gospel.

Ryan Coatney from the family discipleship ministry Cross Formed Kids often says, "Raising Christian kids is always a miracle, but it's never an accident."<sup>1</sup> We can't make our kids be Christians, but we can give them a compelling understanding of

who Jesus is and how he is relevant to their actual lives. So let's step into this process together. You're on your way to becoming the confident Christian parent you dream of being.

## ..... **KEY POINTS** .....

- We can fulfill our calling to share our faith with our families without having to know it all or do it all.
- We can grow an open, positive relationship with our children while slowly helping them weave an authentic, Christ-centered faith.
- Small but consistent choices have the power to crack into a busy routine and change the terrain of our family's faith.
- Our job is to consistently point our kids to Christ, but our kids still have to make the choice to follow.

## MISTY'S STORY

I have four daughters, ages nineteen, seventeen, fourteen, and ten. It has never worked for us all to do Bible study together. However, my fourteen-year-old was open to doing a simple Bible study on the book of Mark.<sup>2</sup> It was a game changer. My fourteen-year-old and I took around three months about three to five nights a week and went through Mark. When we were done, she said, "What's next?" My mamma heart is happy. We are now going through John together, getting to know more of Jesus and having some great discussions. We invite the sisters, and they join in occasionally.

It all started with one night, one conversation, one tiny habit.<sup>3</sup>

MISTY STEINLOSKI





PART ONE

PERFECTLY  
POSITIONED  
FOR  
GROWTH

As a kid, I loathed having to work in the family garden. To be fair, my parents didn't ask much of me, but the little I did have to do felt like agony. When I was a teen, I attempted to grow flowers on my windowsill, but after they grew spindly stems that couldn't hold the weight of a single leaf, I wrote myself off as an official Plant Killer.

Suffice it to say, no one—me included—ever expected me to become the avid gardener I am today.

What changed me from Plant Killer to Master Gardener?

In my first year of marriage, I worked in a friend's greenhouse for a season. She loved everything green, taught me how to repot seedlings and adequately water them, and eventually inspired me to bring a few tomato plants home. When I plopped the plants into pots and stuck them on the steps leading to our basement suite, I didn't expect much. But to my shock, they grew big and strong and gave us many delicious tomatoes.

From then on, I was hooked. In each consecutive rental home, my garden became a little bit bigger, until at one point, I dug up our entire front yard and turned it into a food forest. Not only had I caught the vision for gardening, but my identity had changed: I began to believe that I was capable of being a gardener.

We're going to embark on a similar journey in these pages. I love everything about family discipleship, and I want you to catch the vision for tending the hearts of the kids in your care: why it matters and why *you* are the best person for the job.

Even if you currently feel like the spiritual equivalent of a Plant Killer, you, as a parent, grandparent, or other ordinary human being, are the right person to disciple the children God has given you. You are perfectly positioned to be a Master Gardener in the hearts of children.

It's time for your identity to change.



# THE POWER OF A PARENT

## **Understanding the Biggest Influence on a Child's Faith**

AS I CHATTED WITH OTHER VOLUNTEERS at the orchestra fundraiser, the conversation took a surprising turn. A retired schoolteacher from a local Catholic school began talking about her experiences teaching junior high religion class. Almost out of the blue, she shared the very thing I'd been discovering myself: "Kids get their faith from their parents. Parents have the biggest influence on their kids' faith."

Of course, my ears perked up. This woman didn't have any kids of her own, but she had noticed what was happening in other families. One of the other women in the room asked a natural follow-up question: "Not their peers? It sure seems like they have a lot more influence!"

"No," the retired teacher said emphatically. "It's definitely their parents."

How does faith in Jesus get passed on? From person to

person and life to life, through word of mouth. That's how Christianity grew from a small group of persecuted people who followed a Jewish man named Yeshua—and how even today, in parts of the world where Christians are kidnapped, murdered, or chased out of the country, people still choose to follow Jesus. They see the work of Christ in the lives of their family members and neighbors, and faith gets passed on like one candle lighting another until the light brightens the whole room.

Psalm 145:4 tells us, “Let each generation tell its children of your mighty acts; let them proclaim your power.” When each generation tells its children about our incredible God—about his power and love and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ—the new generation is equipped to choose to follow Jesus.

If you grew up in church, you might think I'm talking about Sunday school or other children's programming, but I'm not. In fact, Sunday school wasn't invented until the 1780s, and it was originally created to teach illiterate, working children how to read. It wasn't until the 1870s that Sunday school became a strictly religious program.<sup>1</sup>

Somehow, Christianity managed to thrive for nearly two thousand years without dedicated church teaching for children. How?

Families.

Grandmas and grandpas, moms and dads, aunts and uncles shared their faith with kids in everyday moments.

## PARENT POWER

I worked on staff in children's ministries for about sixteen years, spending about ten of those as the director. That's when I first discovered the enormous power we parents have when investing

in our kids' lifelong faith. In children's ministry, I was spending twenty hours (or more) per week on a one-hour program—and parents were with their kids for hours every single day.



## A NOTE ABOUT FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP

Sometimes we think discipleship is only one parent's job. The evangelical church has historically held that the father is the spiritual leader of the home, but sometimes that teaching makes us moms feel worried that we'll step on our husband's toes if we read the Bible with our kids. Or maybe we think discipleship is only the mom's job because in many families she's the parent who spends more time with the kids.

But discipleship is the job of every Christian. We are all called to make disciples, and that includes making disciples of the little people in our homes! (By the way, the same is true if you're a grandparent or other significant figure in a child's life.)

We should strive to be on the same page with our spouse if possible, but if not, we need to remember that we're ultimately responsible to Christ. The best way to encourage our spouse to follow Christ is to be filled with love, joy, and peace and to let the Spirit change how we interact with our family. We're not responsible for our spouse's faith. We are only responsible for our own response to God. Be respectful, be kind, and follow God's leading.



A research project from the UK found that “a child attending a church group one hour a week would need to attend for

421 years to equal the same amount of time they would spend with a parent before the age of 10.”<sup>2</sup> Isn’t that mind-boggling? Children’s ministry has value in teaching kids the Bible, but as parents, we have a much deeper ability to disciple our own kids simply because of the relationships we have with our children.

You’re likely familiar with the term *disciple* as a noun. The disciples were Jesus’ first followers—those men and women who lived with him, ate with him, and participated in his ministry. The verb *disciple* means to help someone follow in Jesus’ footsteps. Discipleship is most effective when we do life with those we’re discipling, and who does life with our children more than us?

A few decades ago, a study done by the Search Institute showed that the most significant spiritual influence in the life of a teenager was the mother.<sup>3</sup> The second most influential person was the father, then grandparents. Friends ranked sixth on the list, followed by pastors (seventh), Sunday school teachers (tenth), and youth leaders (thirteenth). And more recent data shows that these significant spiritual influences haven’t changed much. In a 2016 Youth for Christ report, teens overwhelmingly indicated that their family had the most influence on their faith.<sup>4</sup>

*But aren’t young people leaving the church in droves?* you may be thinking. A 2007 study by Lifeway Research showed a trend that continues today: “More than two-thirds of young adults who attend a Protestant church for at least a year in high school will stop attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22.”<sup>5</sup> Even in the early 2000s, only 30 percent of teens remained consistently invested in church as young adults. (Lack of church activity doesn’t always mean lack of faith, but vibrant faith is usually connected to being in some sort of church community.) But that’s not the end of the story. A few

years later, data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) showed this unexpected result: 82 percent of children of Christian parents who walked the walk and talked the talk, considered their beliefs very important, and participated in their congregations were active in their faith as young adults.<sup>6</sup>

What accounts for the difference between these studies—between the 30 percent and the 82 percent? The NSYR study looked specifically at teens with spiritually active parents, whereas the Lifeway study looked at any young person who had attended church regularly for at least a year as a teenager. That means parents play a key role in helping their kids grow a faith that sticks. Most teens who are leaving the church in droves have parents who aren't engaged in their own spiritual growth. (An important caveat, though: We should never judge a parent by their prodigal; even spiritually active parents face the grief of their kids choosing to walk away.)

The NSYR data also demonstrated that Christian families who encouraged talking about faith at home were more likely to have teens who remained faithful. Parents who felt guilty for pointing their children in a *specific* faith direction ended up having kids with *no* faith direction. There is a direct connection between a parent's willingness to talk about faith at home and a child's future faith life.

A different study published by Lifeway in 2017 describes the fifteen characteristics of children who continue to choose Christ as adults.<sup>7</sup> The most influential characteristics are

- reading the Bible regularly,
- praying regularly,
- serving in church regularly, and
- primarily listening to Christian music.

While peers have an impact on listening preferences and sometimes on a teen's willingness to serve in church, home life plays very heavily into all these habits. Sunday school teachers can tell kids over and over to "read your Bible every day," but unless it's a practice in the home, competing priorities tend to win. A child who reads the Bible regularly during the week likely has a parent who either modeled or directly taught that practice.

Why do parents have such influence? Because developing a child's faith isn't just about passing on correct theology or doctrinal points, and it's not about having the perfect curriculum. Faith grows inside relationships, like the ones Jesus had with his disciples, the kind that are hard to build in an hour-a-week program. In fact, a long-term research study showed that the health of family faith is directly linked with how connected kids feel to their parents.<sup>8</sup> The more family warmth you share—in other words, the more connected your kids feel to you—the more likely your kids are to continue on in your faith. Sharing Jesus is just as much about the relationship you're building with your kids as it is about the overtly spiritual habits you implement in your family. Because we have the greatest potential for deep relationships with our kids, we are perfectly positioned to disciple them.

## PLANTING SEEDS OF FAITH

We have the privilege of sharing the gospel with the kids in our homes. The trouble is that we don't always know where to start, or if we have started, we don't know if we're doing it right. You might not have grown up with God. Or maybe, like me, you grew up with the church doing most of your faith development.

As a kid, I was in church multiple times a week for Sunday

school, girls' club, youth group, and Sunday evening church, and I'm not an outlier. Over the past few decades, churches have created a myriad of programs to help kids know God. I've heard children's ministry leaders lament that parents aren't interested in discipling their children anymore, but as a church, we're perpetuating this cycle. We pull kids from the main church service to give them a fun, age-appropriate faith education, essentially saying to parents, "Drop your kids off, and the professionals will take care of this." (The ironic part is that other than a stray staff member, nearly all the "professionals" are volunteers—either other parents or teenagers!)

Over time, we've lost the home-based faith habits that kept authentic, countercultural Christianity thriving for two millennia. Since we've entrusted our children's faith development to church ministries, we struggle to know how to be spiritual leaders in our homes—or even to realize that we should.

It's time to take back this intergenerational faith. No matter who you are, where your kids go to school, how busy you are, how long you've been following Jesus, or how many faith questions you have, you can develop the confidence to follow your calling as a spiritual leader in your home. You *can* draw near to God and bring your children in closer as well.

Yes, God does the hardest work in discipleship: saving us and helping us become more like Christ. When it comes to our kids, we might be tempted to think that faith is just between God and our child. But while God can (and does) draw people toward himself without any human intervention and our kids have the choice to follow or not, we have the privilege and the calling to actively participate in the process. We get to partner with God to cultivate the soil of our children's hearts and plant seeds of faith.

Jesus told a parable about a person sowing seeds on different kinds of ground to demonstrate how his Good News takes root (or doesn't) in our lives. He said,

“Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seeds. As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn't have deep roots, they died. Other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants. Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!”

MATTHEW 13:3-8

How does this parable apply to family faith? Well, you can be ready and willing to plant seeds of faith in your kids, but there are a lot of issues you might run into that stop growth from happening. Three of these soils help us understand the obstacles ahead.

### *Rocky Soil*

The seeds that fall on rocky soil sprout quickly but don't put down roots, so when the sun comes up, these plants wither. Rocky soil is a problem because while plants can sprout and start growing, their roots can't properly tether the plant to the ground or soak up water and nutrients.

You might not immediately notice rocky soil in your family. If you started enthusiastically disciplining your kids and were excited about doing all the things with them but lost heart when

the emotions wore off and family faith development became tough, you've got rocky soil. In a home with rocky soil, teaching the gospel gets abandoned because it seems too hard. We don't know how to answer their questions, they won't sit still, or they're constantly turning the conversation to bathroom topics—so it's easier to wither and opt out.

### *Weedy Soil*

Some of the seeds fall among thorny weeds, which means that as the seeds sprout, the plants get overwhelmed and choked out. Weeds steal nutrients, water, and sunlight from the plants you want to grow.

Weeds can grow at any point in your family life. You may start off discipling your kids with confidence, but then life gets busy and distracting and those weeds crowd out spiritual disciplines. Sports, homework, friends, and music practice take all your family time, and you don't know how to redeem the moments you *do* have. Teaching the gospel gets abandoned because the weeds of life have stolen your time, energy, and motivation.

### *Good Soil*

Some of the seeds fall on good soil and produce a harvest beyond the farmer's wildest dreams. This is the kind of family faith soil we want: for the seeds of the gospel to be cast first into our own soft hearts and then to grow abundantly in our family. We don't need to do it all or know it all to have an incredible harvest. We're just the farmer, casting the seed onto good soil. The Holy Spirit is the one who makes those seeds of faith grow.

I find this truth both freeing and convicting. We can be confident that God loves our children even more than we do

and is doing the hardest work of heart change. But we are called to plant the seeds. Let's face it: We all have some rocky or weedy soil in our lives. We all have times when it's not fun or easy to plant seeds of faith in our kids . . . so we just don't do it. We all have seasons when the busyness and distractions of life threaten to choke out time spent with God. This is part of being human. But that doesn't mean we don't have any good soil (or at least the potential for good soil). When we're faithful to plant seeds of faith in our hearts and families, not even rocks and weeds and times of drought can prevent a harvest.

## . . . . . **KEY POINTS** . . . . .

- Parents play a key role in helping their kids grow a faith that sticks.
- Discipleship is most effective when we do life with those we're discipling, and who does life with our kids more than us?
- Faith development isn't just about passing on correct theology or doctrinal points—faith grows inside healthy relationships.
- While God can draw people toward himself without any human intervention, he calls us to partner with him in the process.
- We have a calling to plant seeds of faith, but we can be confident that God loves our children even more than we do and is doing the hardest work of heart change.

..... **YOUR TURN** .....

1. What role has church played in your own faith development?

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2. What role has church played in your child's faith development?

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3. What are the "rocks and weeds" that keep you from planting seeds of faith?

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4. What is one thing you want to remember from this chapter?

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## TARA'S STORY

Our family has always had flexible quiet times with God. During different seasons, that time has looked like memory verses posted in the kitchen, a devotional at breakfast, or praying in the car.

When my sons were two, five, and seven, we started speaking nightly blessings over our kids.<sup>9</sup> It fit well in that season because my best intentions to pray at bedtime never worked. My sons quickly adapted the nightly blessing to their own personalities. My oldest enjoyed the same blessing every night for years. My middle son changed it up every night. And my youngest turned his into a song. I love how this one holy habit fits each personality.

After we had been doing these nightly blessings for a little over a year, I had surgery on both feet, one right after the other. For weeks I had to sit in my recliner with my feet up while my mom and Grammy took care of the boys and me.

Between the pain and the prescriptions, all our regular habits fell away. We were in survival mode and down to only those things most necessary. Even though the memory verses, devotionals, and prayer time didn't happen, the blessing habit stuck. It was easy for me to do from my recliner, and since I had memorized the blessings months before, I could remember them even with painkillers in my system.

Now, five years later, nightly blessings are still our foundational holy habit. We've added back in our other habits, but even on days when we are too tired, too busy, too everything . . . this is the habit that sticks.<sup>10</sup>

TARA L. COLE