

In the Moment With Mom Mentors

Authentic Insights on 10 Questions of Faith & Children



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*Many thanks to Graham Blanchard's Mom Mentors
for the generosity of their time and encouragement for others.*

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Welcome! Our Mom Mentors Serve You...

A Mom Mentor is not a perfect mom, but she is dedicated to loving God and loving people, beginning with her family. Her work as a popular blogger or author is inspiring, as she offers insights that encourage others to keep the faith—enjoy it and share it. Being a parent isn't glamorous, but it is always meaningful. These compassionate women will serve you in your journey. Join them each month as they answer questions about faith in the family.



Meet The Moms

Kona Brown

A popular public speaker, Kona talks [and blogs with candor and humor](#) on topics such as active citizenship, volunteerism, raising socially responsible kids, issues of faith, beauty with a purpose, style, grace and presence. Kona, a busy mom of two, champions the causes of orphaned and vulnerable children [through her work](#) near Johannesburg, South Africa.

Susan Heim

Susan is an author, editor and blogger, specializing in parenting, multiples, Christian and women's issues. She is a longtime editor for the bestselling Chicken Soup for the Soul series. Susan's many books include *It's Twins! Parent-to-Parent Advice from Infancy Through Adolescence* and numerous Chicken Soup for the Soul books. Visit her at [Susan Heim on Parenting](#).

Julie Kieras

Julie is an English teacher turned stay-at-home mom to two energetic boys. She enjoys reading and writing, wistful thinking, and attempted crafting. Her main concern for her family is shepherding her two young sons' hearts heavenward. You can find her thoughts on parenting, homeschooling, and natural living on her blog [Happy Strong Home](#).

Tiffany Malloy

Since the birth of their first child, Tiffany and her husband have been dreaming, theologizing and blogging about all things family. By day she is chasing babies and doing craft projects, and by night she is managing a journal and learning the countries of the world. Tiffany [blogs about her faith journey](#) and about what families do most—[Play, Eat, Grow](#).

Melissa Newell

Melissa is wife, mother of four, home educator, confetti thrower, and blogger. During the day she home educates her three youngest children. She has a love/hate relationship with social media and confesses that her guilty pleasure is planning, styling and hosting parties. Her engaging [blog covers many topics](#) from home educating to parties.

Dusty Shell

Dusty is a homeschooling mother of four and has been married to the love of her life, a Southern gentleman, for eight years. She is trying to find her own path in this great wide world while devouring chocolate and leaning on the Lord. She blogs about homeschooling, homemaking, motherhood, and faith at [To The Moon and Back](#).

Chere Williams

Chere, our newest mom mentor, is a single Christian mom who is passionate about encouraging other single moms to thrive with God as their partner. She writes an award-winning blog, [A Single Christian Mom's Advice for Making Life Easier](#), which gives practical advice from a Christian perspective on parenting, homemaking, and balancing life as a single parent.

Q: How did your relationship with God change after having your first child?

Julie

As I watched our first son develop and grow, what should have been obvious became clear. I'd known God as Savior, Creator, Healer, Lord, but as a parent? A father? When I took on the daily and hourly concerns of a mother, I understood for the first time the depth, the complexity of God *as a parent*. I saw my relationship with God through a new lens: "Heavenly Father" suddenly seemed like it had been just nominal until then.

Now, as a mom, I spend every waking (and some when I should've been sleeping!) moments, eyes wide opened, focused with love on our child. Watching our son reach, crawl, stand, walk... guiding him through each phase of growth. Our lives are but a shadow of things, I know. Our love for our children is but a shadow of God's love for us... *that truth pierces deeply*. My over-brimming love for my babies, "patience" through late-night feedings, and guiding our sons through toddler temper-storms, is truly but a shadow how much God loves, waits with open arms, and guides us as the gentle Shepherd, the parent of our hearts.

Dusty

You can't gaze into a newborn baby's eyes and not see a reflection of all of your own imperfections. You can't stop yourself from formulating a master plan to undo all the bad in your life in order to make more good for this new one. If you know the Lord, you can't avoid His presence when you stare straight at positively poignant proof of His very existence wrapped up in a swaddling blanket. It takes your breath away. It cannot ever be accurately described, only felt with every ounce of your heart.

Let me just tell you that I believe God used my first baby to rescue me. She made me realize that there is so much more to this big wide world than pleasing ourselves. She helped me turn back to the Lord after spending a couple years of wandering lost and lonely. She is such a blessing and her birth was proof that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him.

Tiffany

For me, not much changed after having my first child because I was still in my daily rhythms. I worked at a campus ministry and was so blessed to be able to bring my little baby with me to work after maternity leave. He sat in his pack-and-play while I typed out some emails. He bounced on my lap while I met with college ladies for discipleship, and played on the floor with his toys while I was having a quiet time.

It wasn't until having my second child, and then becoming a stay-at-home mom, that my relationship with God changed. No longer was I engaged in full-time ministry outside the home, but was stuck inside with two kids under the age of two, figuring out how to be loved by God while changing diapers. It took a couple years for me to really grasp and revel in the fact that my relationship with God isn't based on what I do for Him, but who I am in Him.

Susan Before I had children, I believed in God, but I didn't *understand* God. I saw Him only as a judge. I was sure that God could never love a sinner like me, and the distance between us grew deeper as I made the inevitable mistakes of youth. But then I had children, and they tested me, like all children do. They disobeyed and didn't always follow my rules. They made mistakes, lots of them. But I always forgave them, no matter how angry they made me. I never stopped loving them or wanting a closer relationship with them.

And that's when I realized that my thinking about God had changed. Yes, even now I disappoint Him often, but I know He never stops loving me. He is always there for me, just as I will always be there for my children. I now see God as a loving parent, not a strict taskmaster. And I blossom in the light of His unconditional love, just as my children do in mine.

Melissa I have always had a relationship with God as long back as I remember. Sometimes it was not always a "good" one, but I knew Him and knew what He was capable of. As a young woman, I was given the news that conceiving a child would most likely not be an option, due to the toll that chemotherapy took on my body as a child.

Fast forward a few years and four months into a new marriage, I was told I was pregnant. Shocked, amazed, stunned and blessed were the emotions that ran through me. This gift was from Him. God knew my heart and my desires. Since that time, almost 26 years ago, three more blessings have grown in my womb and are continuing God's work in this world. Before children my relationship with God was good. After having four children spanning 22 years, it's indestructible!

Kona There are aspects of God's character that remain a mystery to us until we move from only ever being somebody's child to suddenly somebody's parent. The curtain on the profound concept of *Agapé* love moves back another inch. Although our love for our children, however deep— remains flawed, we suddenly have another awed awakening regarding what God's love for *us* is like.

But I will never forget lying in the delivery room, Evan Joel Brown's arrival eminent, and suddenly being gripped by the realization...in this moment and from this moment onwards, of my absolute dependence on God. A deeper physical dependence; as I bring into our often terrifying, unsafe, scary world another life, one that I will not be able to physically protect 100 percent of the time despite my best efforts. A deeper spiritual dependence; for the wisdom required moment by moment in the big and the small, to raise up another Tree of Righteousness, wisdom I do not have, and a stretching of my faith to trust God for more than I've ever trusted Him before. Walking in a deeper dependence on God has added an intensity and dimension to my spiritual and prayer life that wasn't there before.

See the next question . . .

Q: What do you wish you had known about God when you were younger?

Julie

I'm thankful for my Christian education, and being raised in church my whole life. I'm certain my upbringing protected me from making negative choices as a young person. However, one thing that got lost in translation, for me, was the importance of having a relationship with Christ, of *knowing* Him deeply and personally. I confused conforming to rules and standards with having a heart devoted to Him. I focused on the outward appearance and not the inward relationship.

I didn't realize my focus was off for many years, well into my twenties. I wish I'd known much earlier that following rules only changes how you appear to others, but it doesn't change your heart. Building a relationship with Christ is what would work on my heart and teach me the way I should go.

My wish for my children is they'd first and foremost concern themselves with developing a relationship with God as their Lord, Savior, and Friend, and be always guided by His Word.

Dusty

I had a rather traumatic childhood. I knew about God and I was saved at age 9 during Vacation Bible School so I knew that He was always with me during the trying times that I experienced. However, I didn't have any mentors to help me foster and grow my relationship with the Lord at that time.

I wish that there had been someone to explain to me how God works everything together for good for those who love Him because there were times that I just simply couldn't understand why He would allow certain things to happen. If I had realized that I could look forward to days when things wouldn't be so bad, that He was still there, carrying me through those terrible events and moving me towards a better place where all of those experiences would serve a better purpose, then I'd have saved myself many tears.

Now I strive to share God's deep and abiding love for us no matter our circumstances. I want to teach my children that even when bad things happen, we can always depend on Him to guide us through.

Tiffany

Growing up, I fit the description of the obedient, quiet child. The one who didn't ask for much, played quietly by herself, and obeyed her parents on their first request. Two and a half decades later, my mom still tells me, "You were such a good child! We never really had any problems with you—so content to just play by yourself." Underneath it all, however, I was a young girl trying desperately to earn and keep the love of everyone around her by being good.

Looking back, I wish I would have known and comprehended the all-encompassing, unconditional love of God—that He loved me whether I was “good” or “bad”, reserved or rambunctious, compliant or stubborn. This desire has shaped the way I parent my children. I try to remind them through my words, my actions, and my prayers that God loves them intensely.

Susan

As a child, I was very insecure. I wanted to be prettier, more popular, and less shy. I craved other people’s approval, and I became jealous when others had what I didn’t. I knew that my parents loved me, but I never felt good enough. I hadn’t yet received the message that I was “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14) by God. It took me many years, well into adulthood, before I learned that God had created me “in his own image” (Genesis 1:27). And I finally started to love myself just as I am.

As a parent, I want my children to know this truth. I want to spare them the pain of feeling unworthy and flawed. The best gift we can give our children is the knowledge that God created them and loves them unconditionally. We are perfect in His eyes.

Melissa

As a young child my family were church goers. My grandfather was a Minister so it was really "expected" for us to be in church. One thing I wish I had known about God when I was a little girl was that he was *always* there. Not just when I was in church or down on my hands and knees at night praying to him. But that he was all around me, all the time. Talking to him was as easy as blinking my eyes. I am filled with joy to know that our children know that God is with them, around them and for them—all the time!

Kona

I wish I had known that God approved of me! My parents divorced when I was very young. God in his faithfulness gave me the most precious and loving second dad any little girl could ask for. But even though neither of my dads ever withheld their approval from me, the brokenness in the heart of a child brought on by divorce can sometimes be a bottomless pit.

My need to feel secure and approved of and accepted led me to develop a full-blown approval addiction. Like any other addiction, it is something that controls and drives you. Enslaved to and dependent on what other people think of me, I became a people pleaser par excellence and the word “no” seldom featured in my vocabulary. I spent my life trying to be what I thought people wanted me to be. It was exhausting!

Only much later in my life did I learn that God’s love for me is more than just a “for God so loved the world” generalized, blanket kind of love, it’s also a “I have called you by name you are mine” specific kind of love. Walking in God’s approval meant that I could stop feeling the need to prove myself to others all the time.

See the next question . . .

Q: What has been the most challenging part of teaching your young child about God?

Julie

The most challenging part of teaching my toddler and preschooler about God has been my need to reevaluate my own beliefs and assumptions about my faith. I want to pass down *real* faith to my children, not just “by rote” beliefs based more on tradition than on actual Scripture. While it’s been a challenge to revisit all the tenets of my beliefs, it’s also been refreshing and a growing experience for me.

Each time I start to explain a Bible story or truth, or my preschooler asks me a question about God (“If God is in our hearts, is He still in the sun?”), I pause and search my heart to be sure my answers are Bible-based. God is using my children to make my own faith deeper and more real! It reminds me that this is why He called the little children to Him. Childlike faith is so earnest. We can all learn from our kids’ faith, I think! I know I am!

Dusty

I'd have to say the most challenging part about teaching my children about God is being consistent in my own walk. It's so easy in today's world to reach a point where we don't keep God first. Even more so, it's hard to make sure that even if God is first in our minds, we show our children that with our actions as well. Distractions are constantly available and the pace of life is busy, busy, busy. I really want to strive to not only say that I love God with all of my heart, mind, and soul, but to show that I do. Children are very observant and take in everything. I want my own children to remember that Mommy was ever ready to get on her knees and turn to the Lord.

Tiffany

One night while putting my daughter to bed, I asked her why she thought she was having a hard time controlling her emotional outbursts lately. She sadly said that she didn’t know; that it was really hard for her. I snuggled in closer, and asked if we could pray. About halfway into the prayer, she stopped me.

“Mommy, we don’t have to pray anymore. God has already said no to all of those things that you are saying.”

“Honey, why do you think that?!”

“Because, I have been asking and asking and it’s not any easier to control myself. His answer is no. Mommy, why did He say no?”

I said something about waiting, patience, and using our methods of controlling our emotions. She wasn’t listening really. To her, God had already said no and she wasn’t going to be convinced of anything different. I laid there a little longer, my heart heavy. These moments have been the most challenging part of teaching my children about God. The times when I have to trust God to be absolutely, unmistakably present to them... where all I can do is wait, pray and watch carefully for His movement.

Susan The most difficult challenge we've faced in educating our children about God has been in setting priorities. Like most families, we have a lot of activities competing for our time -- school, homework, sports, Scouts, play dates, birthday parties, meetings and more. Unfortunately, we often fall into the trap of treating worship time as just another item to do, and we let it slip low on our list of priorities.

We try to incorporate religious teachings into our everyday activities, such as reminding our kids to treat others as they would like to be treated or talking about ways in which we can help the homeless people we see on the street. But we need to do a better job of spending time in God's Word. We often forget that seeking God's wisdom should be our #1 priority, and everything else should follow.

Melissa The challenge has not been teaching them about God, as our children have been brought up knowing nothing but God, the church, Sunday school and how to be a good person.

The challenge has been making sure they are comfortable in their own skin and being able to talk about their love of God with their peers.

It is slightly easier for our children, as we homeschool them. Teaching about God is our way of everyday life. It's all around them all the time. I want to ensure that I am raising Godly children who are proud of their beliefs, want to share that with others and will not back down from non-believers. This is the challenge!

Kona With Godly community, inspired Sunday school teaching and teachers, and diligent Word study and prayer times at home, I've seen lots of ways to enrich my children's faith life and teach them about God and the journey of faith.

What has been the most challenging is that I, "chief of sinners", am called to live out this journey before them, as a living example of the power of Redemption, of how Grace responds, of what Love looks like. This...the ME in this...has been the most challenging part of teaching my young children about God. As a sinful, idolatrous, forgetful grown up, my view of God is often distorted and removed from His true identity.

This is often clear in my responses to circumstances and life events, when I lose sight of the fact that regardless of what happens to me, God still sees. He is still in control; He is still loving. Responding to my life and its happenings in a way that is consistent with this truth, so that my responses assist in shaping a true picture of God for my kids, remains one of my biggest challenges.

See the next question . . .

Q: What is one piece of advice you would give to first-time expecting parents about the spiritual development of their young child?

Julie

When you're a new parent, you think your little baby doesn't understand what's going on, the thought might be to "wait till they're older" to introduce spiritual concepts and activities. Yet my advice would be to begin right away! By making God and His Word a daily part of your lives through song, stories, talk, and church activities, you're telling your children from the start that "God matters in this house." I believe it's never too soon to nurture spiritual development in a child. They are little souls, after all, from the moment they are conceived.

Keep it simple, but keep it consistent. A nightly bedtime Bible story and singing *Jesus Loves Me* as a lullaby are both easy ways to begin. Children believe what they see you do, so making worship a daily practice and natural part of your life will pave the way for easier conversations about God throughout their childhood and into the teenage years.

Dusty

Having a baby will make you realize all of your flaws as if you had a magnifying glass held to them. It's eye-opening and humbling. It will also give you a deeper perspective on why having a relationship with the Lord is so important and critical.

One piece of advice that I would give to first time parents is to be open with your faith. Don't tuck it away and only bring it out when certain situations necessitate it. Children learn by example and will be most impacted by the visual witness of your reliance on the Lord than anything else. Actions speak far louder than your words ever will, so show them, daily, that Jesus is the Lord of your life.

Tiffany

If I could give any piece of advice it would be to be mindful of and intentional with their own spiritual development, and to live that out loud to their child. Passing on a love for the Scriptures, a passion for prayer, and a heart for loving and serving the world happens not when we tell it to our children, but when we model it in front of them.

I don't think I quite realized this until my kids began asking if I ever read my Bible. What a funny thing to ask, right?! But, I realized that it was because I always read while they were sleeping. Similarly, I would often pray for myself and for them throughout the day, but I would do it in my head, just like I did before having kids. The problem is, they couldn't hear those prayers, so they didn't know that my response to our daily struggles, obstacles, and joys was prayer.

I think if we can let our kids see the way we interact with God and nourish our soul, then as they grow they will have a better understanding of what it looks like to love and follow God.

Susan

If you haven't found a church family yet, now's the perfect time to start! Look for a church that has supportive programs for parents with young children, as well as childcare when you want to attend a Bible study or other program.

Ask for a tour of the church's nursery facilities and talk with them about their children's ministries. Do they have Sunday school, CCD or other programs for children? Do they have programs for middle- and high-schoolers? Seek out other families with young children at your church. Find a church where you and your soon-to-be-born child will feel welcomed and supported!

Kona

Nowadays there is an onslaught of information about pregnancy and birth, and I sometimes think we get too hung up on the physical, losing sight of the deep spiritual implications of what is happening in us (during pregnancy) and what is about to happen to us (becoming parents).

When God says He knew us before the creation of the world He by implication states the importance of our spirit, and our focus as we commence the journey of parenthood should also lay there first of all. I would advise parents to give as much intentionality and emphasis to the spiritual side of this experience as we often do to the physical, if not more.

Just as we want to prepare everything in our physical environment to keep our baby safe and help him/her grow, so we must do the same in the spiritual, allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us even in healing and repentance in areas of our lives that might impact the next generation, in preparing our hearts and praying God's word over our children.

See the next question . . .



From *Your Core*, illustrated by Missi Jay

Q: What are some of the ways that you make the Scriptures come alive for your children?

Julie

For all children, I think the best way to make Scriptures come alive is through the five senses. Children naturally learn through their sense of sight, sound, touch the most, but even tastes and smells can be used to illustrate Biblical events and truths! With my own kids, I have incorporated a lot of songs, as both my boys love music. So we listen to a lot of Scripture verse songs, or Bible stories and concepts set to music.

Also using sign language to teach memory verses is so appealing to them, because little kids love fingerplays, and sign language feels much the same to them. Beyond explicit teaching and activities, I try to “speak the Word” to them as much as possible by using Scripture phrases in our prayers, and making connections between real life and the Bible. Perhaps pointing out how a piece of fabric I’m sewing with looks like what I imagine Joseph’s coat of many colors might have looked like. Or while eating fish and rolls, remind them about the boy who gave up his lunch.

If we pray for a sick friend, I will remind them of various people in the Bible who sought the Lord for healing, and how we can do the same thing. Any way that I can, I teach them to make connections between the Bible and their real life happening now. I pray these connections will one day help them understand how the Bible is a “living Word” and still relevant over the passage of time.

Dusty

We spend quite a bit of time talking about Scriptures in our home. We use resources such as sing along CDs, videos, and storybooks to give extra life to the things we read directly from our Bibles. We don't believe this is necessary, but we do think it provides even more stepping stones for our children in beginning to understand God's Word.

We heavily encourage Scripture memorization both at home and through our church's AWANA program. We reference relevant verses when disciplining and also when praising them for good behavior. Generally, we just attempt to weave the Bible into our daily lives as much as possible. Making it a natural part of our home and interactions helps teach our children that Scripture isn't only for church!

Tiffany

One of the great things about kids is that they love stories. And they like to read the same stories again and again... and again. There are a lot of Bibles for kids out on the market, and not all are created equal in the storytelling department. We’ve found a few staples that are beautifully written for the various ages and stages of our children. Choosing the right kid Bible is a huge part of making the Scriptures come alive to our kids.

If we need a little extra something, we like to act out the story we are reading, adding our own props, voices, and details. We talk about what we think the weather was like during the story, the everyday lives of the characters, what it smelled like, etc. Days after we act

out a story, I sometimes find the kids using parts of it in their everyday play. It's then I know they are trying to make sense of what we're reading and learning in the Scriptures.

Susan

Children love to hear about Noah's ark, David and Goliath, and Daniel and the lions. But I want my kids to know that these are more than just interesting tales; they reveal valuable life lessons. Of course, Jesus was the greatest teacher in the Bible, and one of his best-known teachings was "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31). This is especially relevant today when it seems that children are lacking in empathy.

In 2010, a University of Michigan study found that college students are 40 percent less empathetic than they were 30 years ago. I don't want my boys to be part of that statistic someday, so I ask them to picture themselves in others' shoes. How would they feel if they were the boy who was taunted for being fat or the girl who was teased for stuttering? How can they help the child who is struggling with math or sitting alone on the playground? As a parent, it is my job to teach them how to make the lessons from the Bible an integral part of who they are and will become. That is how the Scriptures will "come alive" for my children.

Melissa

What a great question! As I have talked about before, we home educate the children, which I think helps us tremendously when it comes to keeping Scripture in the forefront of their minds. We are able to dive into Scripture whenever we want during the day.

The variety of teaching options out there have exploded in the past 10 years. Some of our favorite activities involving Scripture are using puzzles, flashcards, acting out scenes, workbooks and story discussions. As part of our weekly curriculum, Bible story study is a way of our normal life routine for the children.

It melts my heart when I hear our children including Jesus in their role-playing, just as if he is a friend that they know in person. They are familiar with the popular Scripture stories and know them like they know traditional nursery rhymes. We often discuss Scripture stories around the dinner table with lively animation from the children. I believe that if you teach children, from an early age, where they can go to seek guidance from the Bible, they will use it as a resource and guidebook to their life.

Kona

I always want to be asking myself, do I make much of Jesus in my life? Do we make much of Jesus as a family? With that question as the driver, we've tried to create opportunities and include our children in conversations where we are "preaching the gospel to ourselves," so that the application of the gospel message to the challenges of everyday life becomes a familiar process to our boys.

Speaking the Word of God into different areas of our lives and theirs, as well as praying through the Psalms and talking about the application of the wisdom of Proverbs in different situations that we or they face every day is another way that we hope brings the words on the pages of the Bible alive to them. We try in that way to let the rhythm of our family life be guided by Deuteronomy 6:7.

[See the next question . . .](#)

Q: When days are tough and tiring, what encourages you the most as a mom?

Julie

I love writing about the blessings and highlights of our family life on our blog, so sometimes people make comments like “You’re super-mom!” But make no mistake, I’m no different from any other mom—I get tired, lose my patience, and wonder what I’m doing sometimes! Nobody sees the flopped cupcakes, straggling party decorations, or crying children that don’t make it into the blog posts!

Simple things encourage me as a mom on tough days:

- 1) A Bible verse that inspires me to look up and remember this world is temporary, but my raising my children is an eternal investment.
- 2) When other moms are open about their own tough days (in ways that aren’t just a complaint fest!), it gives perspective and makes me feel less stranded in those hard moments.
- 3) A note, phone call, or email—it doesn’t have to be long and drawn out— just a cheerful “I’m thinking of you!” or “Prayed for you today!” is a touching reminder that what we do makes a difference, and we have a support system that connects us to God’s Everlasting Arms!

Dusty

Motherhood sure isn't for the faint of heart and it has its fair share of difficult days. With four children under the age of 8 and a husband who often works long hours, there are certainly times when I find myself at the end of my rope. Whenever these times come, I look to the Lord and ask Him to step in and get me through the rough spots. For encouragement, I look to my fellow moms with children in the same stage of life because it feels good to release the weariness and to have the support of those who understand what you are experiencing.

Another way that I refresh myself is to take a rest day. The children and I spend the day in our PJs watching favorite movies, reading books, and just spending time together without the burdens of our normal daily responsibilities. This helps to reset our clocks, so to speak, so that we can start the next day anew.

Tiffany

Parenting four kids, ages 6 and under, leaves this momma weary and tired nearly every day! After the kids are angelically sleeping, snuggled deep into their covers, I plop down in front of my computer with a bowl of Hyvee brownie batter ice cream and see who is on Facebook. Not only is this evening routine delicious, but it’s also *life-giving* to me.

I check in with a friend from Missouri to see how she’s doing and how nursing is going with her brand new baby boy. My not-so-cryptic status update regarding my rough day and need for prayer leads to an exchange of text messages and then a 30-minute phone call from a good friend in Pennsylvania. Right before I log off for the evening, a friend from across town messages me to share a funny parenting quote and then asks if I want to meet up with her tomorrow at the park.

It's the community of other mommas, both near and far, who encourage my tired, weary heart—their kind, gentle words and their life-giving prayers that offer the truth and love of God that my heart so desperately needs to hear.

Susan I've always been a worrier, and when deep thoughts kept me up at night as a child, my mother would sing the old Irving Berlin song to my sister and me: "Count Your Blessings Instead of Sheep." Now that I'm a mom, there is even more to worry about, and I often find myself feeling frazzled and exhausted at the end of a long day.

But then I think about the lyrics to that song and remember how much God has blessed me. I have four healthy children, a very helpful husband, a home in the beautiful state of Florida, and a career that I love. Most of all, I know that I can turn my worries over to God. Philippians 4:13 tells us, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." When I'm feeling overwhelmed with all I have to do, I remind myself that I'm not alone... and I am blessed.

Melissa When the days are tough, and they are sometimes, knowing that tomorrow is a new chance to make it a great day is encouraging. Something about the grace that the good Lord puts on us that allows us to be humble and start over. I call it a "do over." Home educating our children is one of the most rewarding things I will do in my lifetime, however, it gives me very little time for "me." I am not talking about going out shopping or having fellowship time with my gal pals, I am talking about real "me" time... time to pray, read, write, blog, long hot baths or phone calls without interruption. Thank You Lord for the "do over" days.

Kona Our pastor once said: "God can do more for your children in their sleep than you can on your best day of parenting." Truthfully, I don't have that many "best days!" I might start off well, with vigor, with resolve towards patience and grace, but my resolve crumbles easily, just a few tattled tales and a disrespectful shrug and an upturned tub of Legos, and the tough and tiring crashes like a wave over me and threatens to drown out what I know to be true. Then I say a simple prayer, mumbled under my breath, to realign my heart and my spirit once again to The One who partners with me in this most sacred of tasks. "He is Able." Able to make something out of nothing (Matt 3:9), able to make all grace abound to me (2 Cor 9:8), able to keep me from falling (Jude 1:24). And the list goes on. I say that, pray that, as a reminder to myself, as a remedy for my soul, as a response to the chaos and the questions that accompany the task of parenting.

See the next question . . .



From *Close as a Breath*, illustrated by Sarah Ackerley

Q: What do you think is the biggest myth about Christian parenting?

Julie

When you're bringing children up to love the Lord as a Christian parent, there's this idea that because you're following God's Way, you'll not have the same issues other parents have with their children. Because you're instilling God's Word in their heart, being a good example, raising them in church. The truth is, every person has their own will, and as much as we try to be great Christian parents, each child has to decide for his or herself to follow Jesus.

I think many parents feel like failures right around the middle and high school years when kids start testing the limits, because "that wasn't supposed to happen." But we need to cling to the principle of "training up a child in the way they should go" and entrust our children to God's care through prayer and His Word to guide their hearts back into His Way.

Dusty

I think the biggest myth about Christian parenting is that there is some sort of magic formula that will produce God-honoring children. There are so many parenting books, both Christian and otherwise, on the market that tell us that if we do ABC then our children will turn out like XYZ.

Parenting is hard. Really hard. It's so easy to turn to these "guides," desperate for a solution because we all feel the heavy burden of raising our children to know, love, and serve the Lord. What we often forget is that the only guide we need is our Bible. The Lord created us all. We are all fearfully and wonderfully made, even our little ones. He gave us all distinct characteristics and personalities. He has a unique plan for each and every one of us.

We are all different from one another which means that our children cannot be parented with a one size fits all mentality. Different approaches are necessary for different children and that's okay. We are going to screw up. It is inevitable. As long as we are leaning on the Lord and looking to Him, He will show us the way to train them up in the way they should go.

Tiffany

The biggest myth about Christian parenting is that if we "do it correctly," we'll have good kids who respect us and love God. If our kids are not "good" kids, then it must be something we as parents are doing wrong.

However, I see in scripture, throughout history, and in my everyday life that there are a lot of people who reject or disobey God. Does their disobedience and lack of respect mean that God didn't parent them well? Does it mean that He did something wrong? Of course not! So, why do I think that I can do better parenting than He, the Perfect Parent?

Once I really understood that, I began to ease up on myself. I still parent my kids with all

the prayer, love, respect, and consistency that I can muster. And while I certainly get discouraged when they choose to disobey me, I also know that at the end of the day, I've done the best that I know how to do.

Susan Probably the biggest myth about Christian parents is that we are no fun! Some people get the impression that we are Bible-thumping disciplinarians who don't let our kids date or attend public school or see any movies not rated G. Christian parents raise their children in many different ways, just like any parents. (And we like to have fun, too!) The only difference in my family is that we want our children to know God so that His love will make life *easier* for them, not *harder*. Christian parenting doesn't mean more rules; for us, it means more love.

Melissa A big myth about Christian parenting is that it's different from any other parenting. Sure we have a foundation, the Bible, from which to work from and guide us. But let's face it, parenting is a challenging job even for those of us who are armed with all the resources our beliefs award us.

I, as a Christian parent, can't create my children, I can only guide them and give them the tools to assist them in their lives and decision-making. I can read all the Scripture to them until I am blue in the face, but if that foundation is not in their heart, it won't stick. Giving them unconditional love and support along with a foundation for loving and knowing God, is really the heart of it all.

Kona We were driving home from church when I asked the boys what they had learned in Sunday school. It was the parable of the lost sheep. "So who are the sheep and who is the shepherd?" I asked. "We are the sheep and Jesus is the shepherd!" pipes up the enthusiastic five year old. I will never forget what he said when I asked him why: "Because we are the ones who get lost, and He is the one who finds us!" A one-sentence summary of the gospel message!

One of the (many) myths about Christian parenting is that our children cannot understand certain spiritual truths until they are "older." This contradicts Christ's own example (Matt 19), and it negates the prophetic truth about the times that we live in (see Joel 2:28-29 and Acts 2:17). The gospel is supremely simple and children are spiritual beings with spirits hungry for truth. They are ready for much more than simple bible stories, and it's up to us as moms specifically to maintain a spiritual rhythm in our home through prayer and discussion that helps connect them to the Divine.

Chere One of the biggest myths about Christian parenting is that it is based on instilling an irrational fear of God in children. I believe most Christian parents do teach their children to have a healthy reverence for the Lord as taught in Scripture. However, establishing a spiritual foundation in our homes doesn't have to be legalistic because the premise of Christianity is having a loving relationship with God through Christ.

Should our children have rules? Absolutely. My daughter knows that when she makes wise choices, she isn't only making me happy, but she is pleasing God, which is what matters most. Equally important is her knowing that when she chooses unwisely, God still loves her unconditionally and gives her grace upon grace.

Our role as a Christian parent isn't to foster guilt and shame, but to encourage our children to develop an intimate relationship with God, which isn't derived from fear, but is based on their own personal experience of his love. Christian values teach our children to love, honor and respect God allowing them to fully enjoy the freedom, protection, grace, and forgiveness that flows through the love of Christ, and there is nothing fearful about that.

See the next question . . .



From *Mud Puddle Hunting Day*, Illustrated by Melanie Magee

Q: What is one family tradition or routine you have that points your child to Jesus?

Julie

We have a few things we do as a family to keep our home Christ-centered: praying before meals and bed, reading Bible stories, and regular church attendance. I am sure those are not out of the norm for most families of faith. This question brings to mind two other family practices that help us point our children to Jesus.

One is that whenever there's an instance of discipline/training, we always seek prayer with our child and talk about the universal need for Jesus to help us do what is right—that we can't in and of ourselves sustain a righteous life but need to seek Him for help. We do this because we want the focus to be on forgiveness and God's Grace and Power in our lives, and don't want our children to think that if they can just be "good enough" that is enough.

Another family tradition is that around Christmas we always do an Advent calendar of activities that focus on giving back and the Christmas story. In a world gone crazy for gifts and glitter, we want to keep the holiday simple enough for our children to enjoy it, to understand the meaning of Christmas, and to see it as an opportunity to give to others rather than to just receive.

Dusty

In our home, turning five is a big deal. It's the marker for starting kindergarten, for aging out of the "preschool" stage, and for becoming a big girl or boy. It is also our family tradition that on each child's fifth birthday, they receive their very own Bible with their name engraved on the front.

While storybook bibles are wonderful and still pulled from our shelves after that time, we actively begin to teach our children to search for themselves in the actual God-breathed Scriptures. They always feel so grown up when it comes time for them to receive their own copy of the Word of God. Bibles are treasured possessions around here and I hope it always stays that way.

We have given two of our four children their own copies of the KJV Bible and our third child will be getting hers next summer. We spend quite a bit of time pouring over various Bibles until we find just the right one to suit each individual child. On their birthday, they open their new gift and then climb into Daddy's lap to be taught about why it is so important to read our Bibles. It is a precious and special time.

Tiffany

When each of our kids were born, we participated in a child dedication service with our local church. At this service, parents formally presented the children to the church, expressing both their commitment to raising the child in the knowledge of God as well as asking the congregation to stand with them through the various joys and trials of life. One element of the service was the reading of a prayer that the parents wrote for their

children. My husband and I had so much fun writing a prayer for each of our children that we decided to make these specific prayers a part of our daily routine.

In the mornings, after everyone is ready for the day but before it's time for us all to go our separate ways, we gather the kids on the couch and we pray their dedication prayers over them. The prayers are filled with our hopes and dreams for them—that they would know who they are in Christ and that God's love, kindness, and wisdom would perpetually flow out of them and into the community they are in. The kids look forward to this part of our routine, and being reminded of who they are and Whose they are.

Susan

My boys attend public school, but for the past seven summers they have attended camp at a Christian school. They look forward to seeing their “summer friends” every year (most of whom attend different schools), and I love that they're getting a concentrated dose of Bible learning. Best of all, they now associate learning about Jesus with fun time. They're finding out that Jesus is more than just a “summer friend;” they can take Him back to school with them in their hearts. Most of us have wonderful memories of the things we did every summer as children. How exciting that my children's summer memories will include their favorite friend, Jesus.

Melissa

So many things in our daily life point our children towards Jesus. The first thing that comes to mind is our daily prayer for meals. This is a group effort as each child has their own favorite part of the thankful prayer. I am the one who usually mentions the friends and family who need God's healing hands, but the children love to be the first ones to say what they are thankful for. Melts my heart.

Other ways I see our children pointing towards Jesus—our youngest has the spirit of Jesus in her heart for animals and is always doing the right thing even when it comes to the smallest little ant. Christmas and Easter are two holidays that our home is running over with the Holy Spirit. From family meals to putting up the many Nativities we have. I can only pray that when they have families of their own, they will continue these traditions and guide their children towards Jesus.

Kona

The journey of a Christian family can be counter-cultural in many respects! Certainly we've found that to add saltiness back into so many celebrations that are seen as “religious holidays” but that have long since lost their rightful focus, is an intentional task, that sometimes challenges your creativity as a parent.

One of the things that we've done is try to bring specific focus to our celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection (Easter), making this our most important celebration of the year and making Him the center of it. Through storytelling, participation, and dramatization our kids have come to understand this emphasis.

They now eagerly anticipate a Christian Seder (Passover meal) each year, with the specific food and activities this includes. We draw relationships between the Passover and important New Testament truths. As it was in the Bible, we try to honor the elaborate teaching experience that this celebration is, using all of our senses to tell the Story of God's grace and through theological, confessional and educational dimensions to participate symbolically in the tale of salvation and the fulfillment and completion of all things in Christ.

Chere

My daughter and I love to attend church. We actually go on Wednesday for Bible study and for Sunday service, but I believe that Jesus has to be part of our daily lives and not just in a legalistic way. There are two routines I practice with my daughter on a daily basis that point her to Jesus. Every night when I make her lunch I include a napkin that has a handwritten Bible verse on it, and underneath it I make it more personal to her so that she can relate to it throughout her day.

When I pick her up from school we'll talk about it on the way home. The other routine we have is that we pray together every morning before I leave her off at school. This is a sweet time we share together and we pray about everything. I always tell her that God is available 24/7 and she can pray anytime and anywhere. I'm hoping these routines will encourage her to develop habits that will draw her nearer to God and help her strengthen her intimate relationship with the Lord.

See the next question . . .



From *Little Seed: A Life*, illustrated by Suzanne Etienne

Q: Where do you live and what are some of your favorite things to do there with your child?

Julie

We live in Connecticut, and I enjoy the four seasons here because we get to spend so much time outdoors in nature with our children. Our favorite activities vary with the weather then! Springtime might find us going on picnics or taking light walks or bike rides with the kids in the trailer. Connecticut has a lovely Rails to Trails System and walking/biking paths along the Connecticut River. Summer we often go to the beach on Long Island Sound or camping in neighboring states.

One aspect of Connecticut that we love is the ability to reach events and activities in *seven* different states in under three hours driving time! In the fall, hiking, apple picking, and hayrides abound—truly, fall in New England is the place to be for seeing an incredible display of God's handiwork! For winter, we typically stay closer to home or enjoy indoor adventures at museums and libraries. We love when a good snowstorm allows the boys to tunnel through the snowdrifts and make tracks around the yard.

Dusty

We live in the foothills of the North Carolina mountains. I was born and raised in the city so it's been quite a transition for me to settle down into the more slowly paced country life. But it has been a fantastic place to raise children. Our family loves to take "Sunday drives" in between church services up into the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains.

The scenery is amazing and there are so many places that serve as gorgeous backdrops for family fun. We also love to explore the bits of history scattered throughout like the old home of a Revolutionary War general, Fort Defiance, or the location of an old Native American love story, "Blowing Rock." As homeschoolers, we love to find hands-on ways to learn like this, and we have great fun together while doing it!

Tiffany

Our little tribe lives in Madison, Wisconsin and we love it here! We've learned that the weather doesn't stop people from playing outside, so as the weather is turning cooler, we're still visiting parks (over 150 public parks in Madison!), having picnics, and visiting the (free!) Henry Vilas Zoo. One of our absolute favorite parks is the Dream Park in Monona. It has a play structure that looks like a castle and a dragon that looks like it's coming out of the ground.

We're not as hardcore about winter as some of the Madisonites, so as the temps dip below freezing, we stay indoors. As a result, we frequent a really great children's museum that allows for some indoor exploration and play. And of course, we are well known at our local library—meeting new friends, attending story times, and checking out an absurd number of books.

Susan

My family and I live in southeast Florida in Palm Beach County. We are blessed to be able to spend plenty of time outdoors thanks to the year-round warm weather. In fact, I can't remember the last time my boys wore jeans or jackets! Needless to say, swimming is a

favorite pastime. One of my sons is on a swim team, and they practice at an outdoor pool all year. His twin brother plays Little League baseball in both the fall and spring. Going to the beach, fishing, and camping are also favorite activities. Having grown up in a blizzard-prone state, I always dreamed of living where I could enjoy summer weather all the time, so I feel fortunate to live in Florida! We really feel God's presence here when we see all of the evidence of his creation, such as the birds, flowering trees, and gorgeous sunsets. I love raising my family here!

Melissa

We are blessed to live only an hour from one of the best cities on this planet! Living so close to New York City affords so many special opportunities for the children and me to explore and investigate (hubby dislikes the city). On any given day you can find us at The Bronx Zoo checking out our favorite animals or in the fall, apple picking at one of many orchards bursting with fresh apples.

Fall in New York is a small glimpse of what is in store for us in Heaven. The color palette that is sprinkled on the leaves and fall blooms can only be made by God. The holidays in New York are like no other—from the start of the season with the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade all the way through until the ball dropping on New Years Eve in Times Square. We love to take the train in and see shows, shop and just take in the people, smells and hustle of the season. I am grateful every day for the area we live in. I am thankful that our children can see the beauty of the country (where we live) and the fun that is offered by the city.

Kona

I am blessed to be planted in Johannesburg (called Jozi or Jo'burg), the 2nd largest city on the African continent. Jozi is the world's biggest man-made forest, with over 10 million trees. At the beginning of October the Jacarande trees are in full bloom, clothing this amazing city in streaks of purple! One of the places we like to visit to see the trees is Northcliff Hill, a 1,807 meter high vantage point that houses the local water tower and offers a panoramic view of the city.

There are also bolted rock faces where we enjoy some rock climbing. Jozi has an amazingly mild climate and in the early mornings and on weekends you will see the urbanites run, walk, or cycle on designated parks and paths—the Browns often joining in. Another favorite is the Jo'burg Zoo, a Jozi institution since 1904, and a place I remember visiting often as a child—specifically to see the polar bears. Our zoo has the only two polar bears on the continent! I pray my boys will grow to love this city with its scars and gems as much as I do!

Chere

My daughter and I live in Takoma Park, Maryland, a small suburb that borders Washington, DC. As you can imagine there's always something to do in the nation's capital. On weekends we often explore the museums, monuments, and the many events that take place all year round. However, in our little neighborhood we always have fun going to the farmer's market, coffee shops, and just taking walks along the trails and creeks. We love road trips, and we're a family that is always up for an adventure!

Sometimes we'll wake up early and drive to Berkley Springs, West Virginia, and have lunch and afterward visit all the quaint antique shops where we're sure to find a few treasures. One of our other favorite places to spend a lazy afternoon is on Solomon's Island where we'll sit by the water and just talk about anything and everything!

My goal is to create long-lasting precious memories, those special ones that I know she'll carry with her. One such memory we created was last week when I picked her up at school during lunch, and we had a picnic in the park. It was lovely, sweet, and simple, which are always the best times.

See the next question . . .



From *All of Me That You Can't See*, Illustrated by Jeremy Tugeau

Q: What are some ways you help your children practice thankfulness?

Julie I think raising children who learn to be genuinely grateful is a challenge in our society so full of material goods and immediate gratification. As parents, we started teaching the boys to show appreciation from an early age—before they could speak, we would say “thank you” for them when someone gave them a gift or compliment. When they could comprehend sign language, we had them sign “thank you,” and now that they are talkers, they say the words. Of course, they often forget, but we are committed to reinforcing and reminding them of the polite response towards others.

Yet, we are not content with just an external show of thankfulness—we are trying to teach our children to show their gratefulness with actions too: writing thank you cards after birthdays and Christmas; donating toys they don’t use anymore; making cookies to give to neighbors; using some of their piggy bank money to buy treats to put in care packages from time to time. I think real gratefulness is instilled not just by saying the words, but in actively giving back to others. The boys are young yet, but we’re praying these words and actions sink down into their hearts to become permanent markers of their character.

Dusty To help our children really understand gratitude, we often try to help them volunteer and help others in need. Seeing for themselves that there are so many others, even children, out in the world who have very hard struggles brings the things we teach them to life in a way nothing else can. Service to others helps them (and us!) remember all of the blessings that we have in our lives. We also make sure to explain to them the thoughtfulness behind the actions of those near and dear to us so that they can begin to understand how those around us are reaching outside of themselves to bring a bit of happiness to others.

Tiffany While making our kids “be thankful” is certainly impossible (oh how I wish there was a formula!), we do try to create spaces where thankfulness is encouraged.

At dinner each evening, our prayer time is a place where the kids love to express their thankfulness to God. They simply thank God for their food and family (in those exact words—ha!) and then choose one thing about their day, thanking God for that person or word of encouragement or fun thing they got to do. Even if they are super grumpy, something about this sacred habit of thankfulness allows them to dig below the crankiness and find the gem of thanks buried inside their hearts.

Another way we help our kids practice thankfulness is by providing opportunities for our kids to serve others. Each year the kids get to choose to pack a shoebox for Samaritan’s Purse, choose something from the World Vision gift catalog, or bake cookies for a lonely older man down the hall. When their attitudes are set towards generosity, they have an easier time seeing the generosity of God towards them.

Susan It's important to cultivate an "attitude of gratitude" throughout our children's lives, not merely through a few good deeds or during the Christmas season. Many of us are blessed with warm homes, plenty of food and clothing, and luxuries like big TVs and annual vacations. But my husband and I teach our children that we shouldn't take these things for granted. Just because we *can* afford to do or buy something doesn't mean we *should*.

When I hear my children complaining about something they can't do or buy, I ask them to consider all of the things they *do* have or get to do (I.e., "count their blessings"). When they receive a gift, I have my boys write a sincere thank-you note to the giver. We teach them to say "thank you" to people who provide service.

As parents, our greatest wish for our children is that they are happy, but this will never be accomplished by giving them more stuff. Research shows that happiness begins with learning to be thankful. "Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life," notes Melody Beattie. By instilling gratitude in our children, we are helping them to be their best selves.

Melissa The practice of thankfulness, honestly, is a way of life for our family. We try hard to not only practice our thankfulness around the holidays, but all year round. We recently hosted our Annual Family Halloween Party a few weeks ago. The party was a huge success, as always, with over 90 of our friends and family in attendance. We always "attach" some sort of charity or giving back to our parties asking our guests to bring a canned good, something for the SPCA or maybe some school supplies for local families.

This year, however, we have a close mom friend who is fighting cancer for the second time since last Halloween. We as a family, made the decision to step it up a notch this year and made this party a fundraiser for her. We raised \$ 2,600 for her and her family to help offset her huge deductible for her bone marrow transplant. We were thankful that we could help out the family and thank God each day that we have a huge network of friends who also wanted to help out. In addition to prayer, it's by works that we teach our children how to be thankful.

Kona Receiving all with thanks is a practice often overlooked as we rush against the restrictions of time! In the microcosm that is the Brown's household, this is no less true. But thanksgiving is a practice, it is a fitness that grows our faith and so I try to intentionally add it to the rhythm of our day. On the ride home from school, I always ask the boys to first tell me what they were grateful for about their day, before they can tell me about what challenged them.

We run on *lots* of impromptu prayers of thanks: when things go right, recognizing that every good thing comes from God, and when things go wrong, affirming that He loves us, He is in control, and He works it all for good. These go out loud, whenever and wherever! Because of where we live I have also tried to ensure that the boys are grateful for the privileges they have, not in comparison to an unnamed mass called "the poor," but in an awareness of real people, with names and stories, that we see, know, and engage with.

Chere There are a few things that I hope to instill in my daughter before she spreads her wings one day and leaves my nest. One of them is a spiritual foundation and the other is an attitude of gratitude and appreciation of her blessings. I never wanted to raise a child with a sense of entitlement, so gratitude is practiced all year, not just November.

We switch up how we do this, but previously we had a gratitude calendar that we started on January 1st. Every day we'd write at least one thing we were grateful for and at the end of the year review all of our many blessings. This year we created the sweetest blessings box, which my daughter put some meaningful words on and we both decorated. We're using the box to store the blessings that we're writing on a slip of paper, our goal is to write one blessing every day.

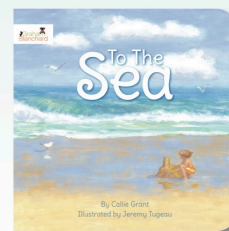
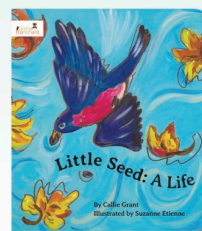
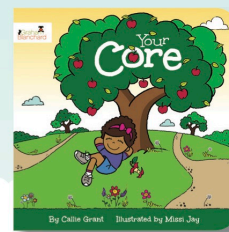
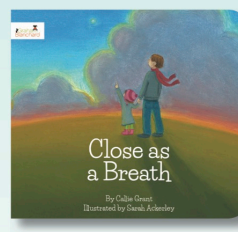
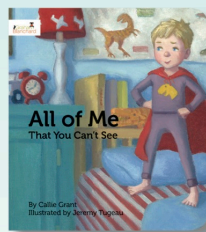
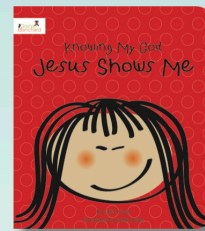
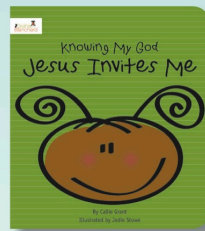
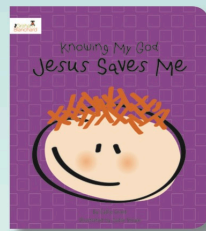
We also make a practice in our morning prayers to say what we're thankful for in our lives. When we keep gratitude in our daily thoughts and prayers we're much more aware of how God is constantly working in our lives!

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