

# Listening Prayer With Children

*Secret things belong to God, but the things he shares will always belong to us and our kids, so that we can obey everything he's asked us to do.*

- Deuteronomy 29:29

*Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Ruler of heaven and earth, because you have hidden your secrets from people who think they know so much, but you whispered them to little children. Why, Father? Just because it made you happy!"*

- Matthew 11:25-26

*Jesus called a little child and had him stand right there. He said: "This is true: unless you become like little children, you won't ever enter the kingdom of heaven."*

- Matthew 18:2-3

## **RUINED GARDENS**

My son Dominic, who was four years old at the time, crawled onto my lap and leaned in close. We were sitting in the front row of a Bible College chapel. I had been teaching there for orientation week and was about to share my final "two cents worth." As the worship time wound down, I asked Domo, "What is God showing you about the students here?" He briefly scanned the crowd over my shoulder and replied, "God is telling me that some of them have ruined gardens." The imagery stunned me. In Song of Solomon, the garden is a specific symbol for a woman's sexuality (Song of Solomon 4:12—5:1). In that context, a locked garden represents the bride's virginity. Her invitation to the lover to enter her garden and taste its fruit is a picture of consensual intercourse. Of course, Domo knew none of this. Yet to me, the image of the ruined garden (i.e., sexual brokenness) was so striking that I followed it up, "What does Jesus want to

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do about that?" He replied, "Jesus wants to plant new flowers in their gardens." This spoke to me of restored innocence. At the end of my message, I related Dominic's message, but refrained from interpreting it for the students. Afterwards, several of the young women approached my wife and me, confessing through their tears that the picture was about them. It was the Father's good pleasure to reveal his word to a hidden issue through the mouth of a child.

### ***A Parent's Job***

Scripture teaches that parents are responsible to lead their children into an intimate friendship with God. More than anyone else, mom and dad must teach their children that God speaks to them.

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. (Deuteronomy 4:9 NIV)

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deuteronomy 11:18-19 NIV)

Children hear the Lord easier than anyone else. Virtually the only block that I encounter in them is their parents' own unbelief. If we will assume, as children often do, that God is *already* speaking to them, we can nurture their ability to tune in to his voice.

I woke up to this truth when my friend Phil heard his five-year-old son Richard talking to an adult male in his bedroom. Alarmed by the voice, Phil ducked into the room to see who it was that invaded their home. Richard stood there alone.

Phil looked around the room, "Who was that I heard talking to you in here?"

"God," Richard replied, as if this were normal.

Here's my point: It *is* normal. Children who *can't* hear the Lord anymore (yes, *anymore*) have usually been inadvertently shut down by an adult.

In this chapter, I hope to equip you with creative spiritual exercises and suggestions that will help you maintain and develop a "hearing heart" in your children whether they're at home, at church or another ministry setting.

## **1. Assume your child already hears God.**

The earlier you expect your child to sense God's presence and voice, the less likely you are to shut down their spiritual eyes and ears. Remember that they will be using their imaginations (which can be pretty wild to adult ears), but that is the venue they are providing for Jesus to come. And he will. My niece Cassie meets with Jesus on a giant imaginary lollypop. Dominic meets him in a mental petting zoo. Your initial skepticism will begin to melt as you hear the profound and intimate conversations that ensue.

To begin with, you might try stating a Scripture truth and then asking your child a follow-up question. For example,

- God is in the room with us right now. Where do you see him? What's he doing? What's he look like? (Assume in faith that they know).
- God talks to us all the time. What is he telling you? What is he showing you? How is he feeling now?
- You may need to explain that even if they don't see him or hear him with their eyes or ears, they *can* see him and hear him with their hearts. So what's he doing? What's he saying in your heart?

## **2. Invite your child to find Jesus in a meeting place.**

I hope that you are convinced of the reality and necessity of treating prayer as a real meeting with a living Friend. I believe that every child can and should be trained to know Jesus as their best friend and to meet with him in a variety of meeting venues.

Again, assume in faith that Jesus will meet your child (and probably has already). Don't make that the issue. Start with the truth that he wants to meet them. The question is "where?" The answer: "Anywhere that they can imagine." Here are some questions to get you started:

- Jesus lives in your heart. What does it look like? If he could meet you anywhere at all, what would that place look like? What's he doing there? (Hint: It's wonderful to have the child draw or paint that place.)
- Jesus is with you in the house, the bedroom, the backyard, at school, everywhere. Where is he right now? What's he up to? What's he saying?
- Jesus meets us at church. Where is he? What's he doing? Are there any angels here today (very common)? (Hint: Let them draw what they imagine is happening during the worship.)

- Jesus wants to meet you in your favourite Bible story. Which one? Where is he? What's he doing? What's he saying? Teach your child how to "step into" Bible stories through his or her imagination.

Our second son, Justice, loves to ask, "Dad, can we do one of those Bible stories where we go into the story?" His favourite is when Jesus was asleep in the fishing boat. As I read or tell Justice the story, I pause after each sentence to ask him to describe what he is seeing. For example, "Jesus and his disciples were out at sea when a storm came up. Justice, can you see the boat? What does it look like? What does the sea look like? Tell me about the storm. What are the disciples doing?" Invariably, Justice decides that he had better go wake Jesus up. He finds him sleeping, wakes him up, and watches him calm the storm. Here's the catch: Then we ask Jesus if there is anything else he would like to tell Justice. Consistently, Justice will see and hear the Lord speaking out promises and blessings in a flood of very pure revelation. It is so precious to hear the heart of the Lord for our sons every time we practice this.

### **🔊)) Tuning In**

If you have or relate to any children, try a "stepping in" exercise with them. Ask them to choose the Bible story. Then in each case, invite the child to find Jesus, approach him, touch him, talk to him, and listen to him. This is not merely a movie for them to watch. It's a real meeting in which they participate. You might be surprised at the beautiful truths that surface.

### **3. Convert bedtime prayers into listening prayers.**

Most parents are used to walking their children through some standard prayers at bedtime. It's not difficult to convert these rituals into three-way conversational prayers between you, your child, and Jesus. You can ask the question, the Lord can provide the answer to your child, and your child can report it back to you. This format can become a natural pattern for family prayer. Here are some starter questions you may want to try:

- Jesus, is there anything today that we could thank you for? Why?
- Is there anything that we need to say sorry for? Will you forgive me?
- Is there anyone you want us to pray for? How? (Family, friend, and missionary photo albums are terrific for this. So are atlases or missions handbooks that give children a global vision.)

- Are there any *burdens* we are carrying that you want to lift for us? If so, ask Jesus where the burden came from, what it is, and if he would please remove it.
- Jesus, do you have any *promises or blessings* for me before I go to sleep?
- Bonus question: Jesus, what was the best part of *your* day? What made *you* happy?

For years, my son Stephen was an insomniac. By the time he was eight, he was able to ruin a good night's sleep by mulling over worries with the best of them. He would commonly lie awake in bed for several hours before settling down to sleep. But on the same weekend that he had his visitation from the Lord, he started falling asleep within ten minutes. We asked his secret. He said that he had devised a scheme in which he gathers up all the day's problems in prayer and jams them into one little knapsack. Then he walks to the cross, finds Jesus there, and offers him the knapsack. The Lord places it on the ground and sets it on fire. The image of the living Christ by the cross is the resting place for Stephen's anxiety and his weary head.

#### **4. Invite Jesus into nightmares and night terrors.**

Children seem to be born with their spiritual windows wide open. You don't have to look far to hear angel-stories from very young children. Our second son Justice has periodically seen angels in our house, outside in the trees, and running beside our car. Of course, children also commonly complain about "monsters" in their bedroom at night. Night terrors, nightmares, monsters under the bed or in the closet, when not a dietary or health-related issue, can often be explained as:

- Actual spiritual oppression
- Imaginary projections from real fears
- Annoying bedtime stalling tactics

In many cases, a child's own fears activate their imagination in order to delay their bedtime. Rather than rebuking them for believing in something that is not real, I find it much more helpful to invite Jesus into the room to deal with the monsters. I ask the Lord to show our kids the angels and invite them to clean house. This is very important for two reasons.

First, if the monsters are really just a projection of the child's fears, why not flush the fear out rather than repress it? And who better to eradicate fear than the Lord Jesus, who is happy to use the child's imagination to bring about peace? He loves to train them to fear no evil by "practicing his presence."

Second, if the monsters are actually unclean spirits that the child perceives through his or her spiritual windows, then the "not real" message bears awful fruit. It ignores the child's

real oppression, leaving them plagued with fear. Worse, it hamstringing them from seeing the Lord or his angels come to their aid.

Diane is just one of many of my friends who bore the wounds of this message throughout childhood. She began to see monsters in her bedroom at night in open-eyed visions during her pre-school years. When she reported it to her parents, they never introduced Jesus or the angels into the problem. Instead, they would either punish her or negate what she said. The message she heard was that what she was seeing was not real. They chalked it up to an “active imagination.” She wondered if she was crazy and tried to pretend that the monsters weren’t there. But she continued to see the evil images—*right into adulthood!* While the “not real” message could not deliver her from evil, it *did* create a blinding filter for good things. She now found it much easier and more common to see demonic spirits than to perceive the Lord. Prayer ministry has slowly rectified this malady. Only now in her thirties has she become aware of the presence of Jesus and his angels round about her.

In all of these cases, listening prayer is an appropriate and efficient way to resolve things. We don’t deny what they are experiencing. We invite Jesus in. We ask him what the monsters are, where they came from, and what he wants to do about them. I’m not afraid to attach consequences if the trouble continues, but initially I threaten the monster, not the child. For example, “Jesus, can it come back? If it tries to come back, Jesus what will you do to it?” Then we speak a final truth over the child, “Jesus is here now and you can tuck him in with you. You’re totally safe. Good night.”

### ***5. Take conflicts at school and at home to Jesus.***

When our children have a rough day at school, we try to find out as soon as they get home. Whether they had trouble with the teacher or other students, we do a mini inner healing with them. The same goes for when they experience conflicts at home with their siblings or with Edith and me as parents. We come before the Lord together, finding him in the situation and meeting him at the cross.

- What happened? How did that make you feel? Why?
- Where was Jesus when that happened? What was he doing or saying?
- Would you like Jesus to lift away the hurt and anger?
- Ask Jesus to show you the others through his eyes. Can you send these people to the cross and leave them there?
- Is there anything you need to say sorry for?
- Does Jesus have a promise for you about this?



## ***6. Help your children interpret their dreams.***

We enjoy listening to each other's dreams in the morning. Often the kids will wake us up and sit on the bed, describing their night time escapades. These morning dreams are fun to interpret with Jesus' help. We invite him to identify the symbols in the dream and the message that he has for us that day. Asking Jesus what each object and person represents keeps us in an intuitive ("right brain") space. This type of interpretation flows much more easily than shifting into analytical dream-dictionary modes. Assume that the children will hear Jesus' interpretation without even having to think through it. The very first thought that comes to their minds when we ask Jesus a question is usually right on.

## ***7. Incorporate listening prayer into Sunday school.***

We use listening prayer in every Sunday school class at Fresh Wind. Every child is taught how to find a meeting place with Jesus, how to step into a Bible story, and is given two to three questions to ask Jesus when they get there. The children who are teaching our Sunday school classes have a lesson-planning outline that makes preparation a listening prayer exercise. Here's how it looks:

- Read the passage. Ask Jesus to highlight the verses he wants to emphasize. Ask Jesus, "What's the main point of this story?"
- Learn the story well enough to help the class step into the story.
- Ask Jesus to show you a time when you saw this main point happen in your life. Where was Jesus in that event? What was he doing?
- Ask God for questions that the class can ask him together.

Regardless of the topic, each week the children practice their skills in hearing, obeying, and acting on God's voice.

My son Stephen (now thirteen) used the above lesson plan to teach the kindergarten to grade three class the story of Jesus and the ten lepers. When he read the story, God highlighted the importance of thanksgiving when asking for healing prayer. However, by the time we arrived at church, Stephen was in tears with a severe headache and ready to bail out of teaching. During pre-service prayer, we prayed for him while he focused only on thanksgiving and praise (practicing what he was going to teach). After two or three minutes of prayer, he testified that his pain had gone from a "10" to a "7." He went into the service and continued in praise for two songs, then received communion. The headache vanished completely.

After worship, Stephen went to class with a dramatically updated lesson illustration. He taught on the ten lepers, shared his experience and then brought his class into the main service. As my message wound down, the little band of intercessors roamed the room, asking Jesus who needed prayer for healing. They surrounded and soaked one person after another in prayer as God led them. No one will remember my message. But the image of children moving as one, hovering around the sick and disabled, will remain with us for a long time.

### ***A Final Secret***

As our congregation has practiced bedtime listening prayer with their children, a trend has developed: the Lord speaks to them, and then they share what he said or showed them, adding, "He also told me some secrets, but I'm not allowed to share them with you." True to his word (Matthew 11:26), Jesus is keeping the "hidden things" from us and revealing them to our little children. Only with childlike trust will we ever enter into those kingdom secrets. So here is my advice:

Your children hear God. If you wake up to it yourself, so will they. When *they* call on the Lord, he *does* answer them. For every page of revelation you read into your children's words, the Lord will write an entire journal's worth. When you learn to hear God's voice through them, the secrets of the kingdom are just around the corner. Why? Because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. What is not received is not given. But to those who receive, "a little child will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6).

