

The Spiritual Potential of Children

Part of the membership process here at Faith involves sharing a persons "life story" with the congregation. For seven years I have heard story after story about how people in this church, many of you, came to know Jesus at an early age, as a child, only to walk away into lifestyles apart from Christ. Then after experiencing the pain and heartache of those lifestyles have come back to follow Christ again. I praise God for those homecomings, but it is not long after I hear those stories that the current research statistics come to mind. Conservative estimates say that 75% of young people leave the church by the end of their Freshman Year of College, some research suggests that this number could be as high as 88%. I hear those stories and I think of those statistics and then I walk down the hall to the children's end of the building where I work with all the children that God has blessed us with and I wonder, will nine out the ten children I work with walk away? "Will that be their story too?" I don't believe that is has to be because of the great spiritual potential that lies in in every child and youth.

Today we're going to look at the spiritual potential of children as described by Scripture and my own experience. We are going to talk about how this might impact the way we live our lives. It might be helpful first to define exactly what this potential is. Every child, around the world, has the ability to know God, to be led by him, and to obey throughout every stage of their life. They also have the ability to share that with those around them. This might sound a little familiar, every child has the potential to experience God in all of life and help others do the same.

As I get ready to share I want to make an affirmation. I have absolutely no doubts about Faith eFree's love for children. I feel like we here at Faith have some of the greatest people investing in some of the greatest children. I do, however, want us to ask, "Are we taking advantage of the full spiritual potential of our children for their own good and for the good of the Kingdom?"

We're going to take a look at a boy and a girl in Scripture that, I believe, were products of communities where God's heart for the training up of children was taken seriously.

First off we're going to consider David, specifically his encounter with Goliath. This portion of Scripture is sometimes portrayed as God using a child to defeat a fierce warrior to show how powerful God is, and the story stops there. God did use this event to show His faithfulness but I feel like picturing David as a youth who slung a lucky stone does us a disservice. Indeed he is young. Saul says to David as David is making his case for the chance to fight Goliath,

"You are not able to go against this philistine to fight him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth."

1 Samuel 17:33

Yet before we settle for this perception of David consider this description of David found in 1 Samuel 16 before the David and Goliath showdown.

One of the young men answered, "Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the Lord is with him."

1 Samuel 16:18

So here we see David, in his youth, described as a skillful musician, a man of valor (brave), a man of war, prudent in speech (used skill and good judgement in the use of his words), a man of good presence (handsome), and finally we get an acknowledgment of God's presence in his life. I would love to be described like that, but in my mind, until recently, that is something I thought one could only achieve around 40 or 50 not as a youth.

Yet going further into the story consider the words and accomplishments of David. Listen to his insight and maturity as he responds to Saul's objection of him being merely a youth.

34 But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, 35 I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. 36 Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God." 37 And David said, "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

1 Samuel 17:34-37

What could Saul possibly say to that? Not much, Saul responds by saying "Go, and the Lord be with you!"

Some of you might be tempted to think oh but he was a teenager and not a child when all this happened. Probably, but that depth of maturity doesn't come over night. There had to have been deep spiritual insights trusted to David at a young age. I challenge all the parents in this room with young boys to go back through this story and imagine your child with that kind of spiritual maturity as a youth.

Let's also take a look at Mary, the mother of Jesus. While the Bible doesn't tell us her age the Jewish culture tells us that girls were married usually within the first year of being able to give birth. Scholars estimate Mary's age at the time she gave birth to Jesus to be anywhere from 14-17 years old.

Let's set the scene up. Mary, a teenager, who's engaged to be married has an angel appear and tell her she will be pregnant before marrying Joseph. In the Jewish culture that could result in stoning, a lethal form of punishment. Let's take a look at how Mary responded to that news.

38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:38

We see in Mary complete submission to God's will at a very young age. I am going to read Mary's song of praise that is recorded in Luke 1 as her response to this news. I want you to listen for the spiritual maturity that her words demonstrate.

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

50 And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

55 as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

Luke 1:46-55

Mary got it. She saw the big picture and knew history would hinge on the birth of her son Jesus Christ (all generations would call her blessed). An eye opening exercise for me, that you might want to do also, was to use a study Bible to look this passage up and then follow the cross references throughout this passage. You would quickly see, as I did, that Mary not only knew the Old Testament Scriptures but understood them and

their implications as well. Back then Old Testament copies were reproduced by hand on scrolls. Most people did not have personal access. Someone was investing a lot of time and effort in discipling Mary. Parents, when you look at your daughters do you believe they can have the spiritual maturity that Mary had as a teenager? I believe they can.

So there are the two examples from Scripture that we have looked at today that show the spiritual potential of young people. If your still tempted to think Mary and David are exceptions what about:

- >Daniel
- >Shadrach
- >Meshach
- >Abednego
- >Esther
- >Joseph
- >Moses
- >Miriam
- >Samuel
- >Josiah
- >Timothy
- >The Boy who Shared His Lunch
- >The Rulers Daughter
- >Children Laying Palms welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem
- > Namaan's Servant Girl
- >Jesus Himself as a boy

In Scripture, young people experiencing God was common.

One might think that times have changed, that potential like that does not exist anymore. I believe that is wrong as well. I have been blessed with many amazing relationships here at Faith eFree. Many of you have invested hours and hours into me, through good times and bad. Yet, it is through the prayers of two children in this church that I have experienced two of my biggest "breakthroughs".

One of those experiences happened a little over a year ago. One of our students who, I believe, was 11, at the time. was involved in a program at another church and had invited me to come experience it with her. Upon arriving she met me at the door and, though I was late, welcomed me with a great appreciation. She had brought a special snack and made a card in which she had wrote:

Dear Mr. Barker,

Thank you so much for all you do! Organizing children's events performing skits, and coordinating chapel. You're a tremendous help to our church. You must have a busy

schedule, but I've never heard you complain. You are faithfully serving the Lord and our church. Thank you!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The card was signed not only by this student but by many others as well. As you could guess, by this time, I was riding pretty high and feeling pretty good, but the last part was the most impactful. With no suggestion from anyone else, she pulled me aside from the rest of the class and prayed one of the most spiritually significant prayers that I have ever had prayed for me. There was a depth, richness and insight to her prayer that until that moment I would have never expected from a child. I am not 100% sure how this works but I know I sensed God's deep joy and satisfaction in this little girl. I watch and wait with great anticipation to see what God will do with this girl's life.

Whether we are discussing children and youth in the Bible or our own experiences with children around us, the potential for children knowing God and following him through through all life stages is clearly there.

Knowing that potential, the Bible gives a clear plan drawing out the potential of a child. That can be found in Deuteronomy 6:6-9. God had just given Israel his commands and He follows them up with this encouragement:

6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:6-9

These verses give us a clear picture into what gave young people in Scripture the opportunity to know God at young ages. The command was to live lifestyles characterized by constant communication about who God was and what He has done. You can sum this up by saying that we can disciple our children best along the way and day by day.

From reading these verses in Deuteronomy it is clear that parents will play the largest role in the discipleship of their own children. Due to the sheer amount of time you, as parents, spend with your children and the position of respect you hold in your child's life, you will be the most influential role models, hands down.

For the the rest of us, who don't yet have children or have grown children, we see several examples in Scripture of non-parent adult figures playing significant roles in the lives of young people. You have Paul pouring deeply into the Timothy, Eli investing in Samuel, and some scholars even think the disciples were teenagers when Jesus called them to follow. As I think about the church's responsibility to train up disciples I can't point to any one demographic within the church and say, "It's your responsibility." We must look at ourselves as a collective family and say, "It is our responsibility!" Children

need to be exposed to a broad section of the body of Christ fulfilling the roles we were created to fill.

How can we as a church help develop a child's potential into maturity? Two things come to mind. Specifically, formal and informal ministry to children.

Sunday mornings, special events and programs are the formal ministries to children of Faith eFree. Annually, we need 180 different people to pull off Sunday mornings alone. Seventy of those 180 serve on a weekly basis from September until June or from June until September. The formal ministries of the church are a great chance for children to experience a vast array of relationships with adults and peers that will encourage them to their full potential in Christ.

Men, we struggle at being a vital part of the formal ministries of the church. Currently only 15% of our weekly Sunday school teachers are men. If you take out the two Jr. Boys teachers, who have to be men, that number goes down to 8%. I would love to see that number somewhere around 40% or more. Your efforts in the formal ministries of the Children's department here at Faith eFree are vital to our children's discipleship. In addition to the immense impact the women of faith have, our young boys and girls need to see what it looks like for grown men to follow Christ and to share about His love.

Outside of the formal ministries of Faith is the informal ministry that happens "on the way and day by day". I get this gut feeling that most of a child's potential is drawn out informally. We should always be extremely intentional in our interactions with children. It can be easy for us to be intentional in a Sunday school class and totally miss a child's spiritual needs during the rest of their lives. Anytime a child crosses your path, in an appropriate context, you have the potential to make a significant impact.

Here are a few examples of how this informal ministry could work here at church. Each of you have been given gifts and talents. As you use those gifts and talents I would suggest looking for ways to invite children and youth to serve along side of you. Not only to watch you serve but to actually engage in meaningful service to God. Asking them to help with a project or simply asking what they think could engage them in some of the things God is doing amongst us.

Another way is to simply notice children and get to know them. Children can be very shy, and there is good reason for children to be wary of strangers, so I do not recommend simply walking up to a child and introducing yourself. But many of you have strong relationships with other adults here at Faith. As you interact with those friends after services or at small groups take time to acknowledge their children. Ask them about their interests and if they are brave enough to talk with you follow up with them about what they shared the next time you see them. The more consistent efforts you make the more impact this will have.

If you are not around children or families with children and do not feel led to the formal ministries of the church, then you can pray. You will find my email address on the

church website. Drop me a line and we will give you some very specific ways to pray. If we are going to see our children mature, in Christ, prayer will have to be a cornerstone.

Parents, a lot of your informal ministry will not even happen within the walls of this building. A lot of the children here at Faith know the stories in the Bible well. They can tell you the who, what, and where of story and often finish telling the story for you. What they need in addition to those stories are adults who will come along side of them and show them how those things connect with real life. As you read through the Bible with your children ask yourself how the things being taught can be demonstrated to your children in real world situations, then go do it.

The reality of our culture is that young people and adults live in two different worlds. One in a world of play, learning and imagination the other in a world of work and responsibility. The more we can do to overlap those two worlds the more spiritual potential we will see coming to fruition in the lives of our children. Just about anything you do for the kingdom of God can be done with a child doing it right a long side of you.

This won't be easy though, it will take time, hard work, and intentionality in both formal and informal ministry. In our culture we crave efficiency. Discipling children is not an efficient process. More often than not, the goals we try to accomplish with what we do are not as important as the lessons a child can learn while we do those things along side of them. The most important work I do is usually done on one knee as I try to enter into a child's world or with a child by my side as I try to bring them into mine.

To all of the children under the age of twelve I want to tell you that I believe you will do some of the greatest things, we have every seen, for God. I believe you will live lives that shine so bright other people will want to know what you have. You will pray prayers that will heal, encourage, and inspire others in their own pursuits of God. You will save hundreds of lives through your compassion for others who live in extreme poverty. I believe that you will change the world because of the way you live your lives and because of the way that you love Jesus. And I believe that you can do all of those things right now.

To everyone over the age of twelve, because of the vast spiritual potential of a child, I believe that you will be the ones who help our children recognize their potential and help them to accomplish all those things and more. If we get this right, we, along with our children, and the rest of the world will benefit from a generation that could potentially accomplish more for God than any other generation ever has. May we continually ask, "Are we taking advantage of the full spiritual potential of our children for their own good and for the good of the Kingdom?"