

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: My eight-year-old has been reluctant to say his prayers with me at night. I could tell his heart wasn't really into it. When I pressed him, he said that he didn't want to pray because God didn't answer his prayers. We had been praying for his dog to get better, but we had to put it down last month. Help!

ANSWER: What a heartache! **Prepare for a long haul.** This will be a **journey** for **both** of you. Telling him that "God answers all prayers...sometimes "yes", sometimes "no", and sometimes "wait", won't work very well at his age. Although that answer is true, I doubt if your 8-year-old will embrace it. Instead, you will have to enter his struggle and stay at his side. Here are some parameters in which to think and pray and act.

1. We Christians work hard to impress upon our children just how much God loves them, how He is always with them, and how He answers their prayers. All true. However, their immature minds interpret these truths as "God will stop all bad things and give me whatever I want." (Sadly, much of the adult Christian community interprets these truths in the same way. Certainly the secular world understands the concept of God in that way.)
2. When the first big disappointment comes, their faith is shaken, sometimes to the point of disbelief, anger and resentment. Sometimes, it isn't one big event, but the accumulation of many small disappointments and seemingly unanswered prayers.
3. Sin has been active from the beginning. We are by nature self-absorbed and myopic in our thinking. We want what we want. God is not so much the object of our worship and obedience; he is often relegated to "assistant", "co-pilot", "facilitator" and Santa Claus. God is seen as "useful" to help us get what we want and help us achieve the good life now. When he doesn't come through for us in the way we think He should, we get bitter and disillusioned. We rarely see that our thinking and our feelings are distorted by sin.

Think of the solution as a marathon race. You must enter his struggle, chip away at his false perception of God's character, demonstrate truth by living it, and make your own faith-walk seductively attractive.

1. Show him that YOU never give up on prayer or God. Continue your prayers out loud so he knows where YOU put your trust.
2. Make certain you have a good handle on your own theology of who God is and how He works. What do you believe is true about how God uses struggles, pains and disappointments? Be prepared to answer tough questions. God will be challenging you as you help your son! You can't take your son to theological places to which you haven't gone.
3. **Pray for and create opportunities** where you can have on-going deep conversations (in 8-year-old language) regarding his disappointments and misconceptions about God and how he works. These conversations are especially powerful if **dad** is the initiator and leader.
4. Learn to ask thoughtful and challenging questions rather than just pontificating some wrote theology.
5. Use your imagination and cleverness to teach without sounding like a teacher. Draw him, entice him, and seduce him back to God. Make your faith-walk so attractive that he will want what you have.
6. Familiarize yourself with some biblical stories where God didn't come through the way people wanted him to (e.g. St. Paul's "thorn in the flesh", David's prayer for his illegitimate son by Bathsheba, etc.)
7. Realize this parenting struggle will be a **journey** for both you and your son. There is no quick fix. There is no one piece of insight that will solve this internal faith-struggle. Every person of faith must come to grips with who God is as He reveals himself, not as we think he ought to be.
8. Pick up a copy of Phillip Yancey's *Disappointment with God*.

As a father, my greatest fear is that my children would walk away from their faith in Jesus. I wish I could "make" faith happen in the lives of my children, but that is the job of the Holy Spirit. My job is to live a life of example, be willing to enter my children's struggles with the character of Christ, pray constantly for them, put the Scriptures into their hands, provide a consistent opportunity for worship and service, Word and Sacrament...all the while trusting in the all-knowing, all-powerful and all-loving God of the Bible.

Godly parents know that giving a child everything, never saying "No!", and never allowing him to reap the consequences of his actions will produce a self-absorbed, immoral and uncaring monster. God is our heavenly parent. He will not let us use Him, recreate Him,

or ignore Him. He wants to forgive us, transform us, and send us out into the world. In this fallen world, these godly goals are best achieved in the context of struggle and pain and disappointment. The next world will be completely different. As you enter the faith-walk of your son, don't lose track of God's ultimate and eternal purposes.

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