

Talking About Faith with Children

Conversation 1:

Child: What does God look like?

Pastor: Gee, that's a pretty important question. Have you thought a lot about it?

Child: Yeah, some. What do you think?

Pastor: Well, I haven't really come up with a good answer. I guess I'm just not smart enough to pull it all together.

Child: I've had that feeling too. I keep thinking I should be able to know what God looks like, but I can't figure it out.

Pastor: I think it's not that we're dumb. I think it's that God is so much more than anything we can picture that we can't get a handle on it. How does that sound?

Child: I hadn't thought about that. I guess that might be true.

Conversation 2:

Child: Why did God make my mommy die?

Pastor: Do you believe that God causes people to die?

Child: Well, I guess so. Doesn't God make everything happen?

Pastor: Well, some people believe that. I believe that some things happen because people make mistakes (in the case of an accident) or because our bodies don't work right and can't be fixed (in the case of illness).

Conversation 3:

Child: Where is my mommy?

Pastor: I believe she is in heaven.

Child: Is she with God?

Pastor: Yes, I believe she is, and I believe God is taking good care of her. Have you been worrying about her?

Child: Yes.

Pastor: What do you worry about?

Child: I worry that something bad will happen to her and then I won't get to see her when I go to heaven.

Pastor: That really is a worry. It's hard not to worry when it's something we can't see. But I believe that God will always take care of us for ever and ever. Does thinking about that help you worry less?

Child: Yes, it helps, but I still worry some.

Pastor: Of course, but maybe when you start to worry you can remember really hard about how God promises to take care of us.

Conversation 4:

Child: Why didn't Jesus come down from the cross?

Pastor: That's a difficult question. Have you thought about it?

Child: Some.

Pastor: What have you been thinking about?

Child: Well, I wondered if God didn't forget about him for a little while.

Pastor: Do you think that really happened?

Child: I guess not.

Pastor: Does it feel as if God forgets about you sometimes?

Child: I guess so.

Pastor: I think there are times in our lives when we all feel that God has forgotten about us. It feels lonely. But we believe God is always here. God promises never to leave us alone. We have to keep remembering that and reminding ourselves. Can you do that?

Child: I can try.

Pastor: Do you want to think of some other reasons why Jesus didn't come down from the cross.

Giving an Answer – Perry Downs in the article, *Where Is Heaven?*

Where is heaven? Where is hell? How will I get to heaven?

Heaven is where God is. Hell is a place far away from God. when you die, God will take you to heaven to be with him.

Can I take my special toy with me?

God will have everything you need and want in heaven. We don't have to take anything with us.

Will our pet that died go to heaven?

Heaven is a place for people. But God promises us that everything we need to make us happy will be there. God will do the right thing.

Will Grandma and Grandpa be in heaven? Does everyone go to heaven?

Heaven is a place for people who know and love Jesus. Everyone who loves Jesus will be in heaven. (If it was clear that the grandparents were not believers: We have to trust God to do what is right. He will do the right thing with Grandma and Grandpa.)

Why can't I go to heaven now?

God takes us to heaven when it is the right time. For now he wants you to be here with me.

Is God here? I can't see him.

God is everywhere, including right here with us. Just like we can't see the air and yet it is here, so we cannot see God and yet God is here.

What does God look like? Is God a girl or a boy?

Jesus said that God is a Spirit. That means God does not have a body, and God isn't a boy or a girl. God is not like us.

What is the Trinity?

The Trinity is a way that we talk about God. It means that God is very wonderful and very hard to understand. There is one God, and God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is very mysterious, isn't he?

Where is Jesus?

Jesus is with God in heaven, and he is waiting for the day when we will be with him, too. But Jesus also promised us that someday he will come to earth again. Won't that be wonderful?

What does Jesus look like? Is he big?

Jesus looks like a man, and he is as big as a man. But Jesus is a very kind man who loves children. We don't know exactly what Jesus looked like when he was on earth.

Does God still love me if I do bad things?

Yes, God still loves you when you are naughty, but God wants you to do good things.

Does God love "bad guys"?

God loves everyone and wants us to know that doing bad things will hurt us. God is sad for bad guys because they hurt themselves and other people by being bad. God loves bad guys, but God is not pleased with how they behave.

Why did God make the devil?

I don't know why God does a lot of things. But God is very smart, and God is very good, so we can trust God even when we don't know why God does some things.

When bad things happen, is it because God is made at me?

God never does things to us because he is made at us. But sometimes God does let bad things happen to us. God promises us that he will always be with us to help us, even during the bad things that sometimes happen.

Isn't going to church the same thing as being a Christian?

Being a Christian means that we believe in Jesus and try to follow his teaching in our lives. If all we do is go to church but don't live our lives like Jesus taught us to, then we might not be real Christians at all. Part of believing in Jesus is trying to live like Jesus wants us to live.

Guidelines for Talking About Faith with Children

Chapter 15, When Children Suffer

1. Children do not talk about faith the same way adults do, but their insights can be quite complete. (174)
2. Remember that children mix logical and concrete thinking with fantasy. (174)
3. Children are often more willing than adults to deal with reality. (175)
4. Children have very individual faith systems...so we can't assume what they're thinking. (175)
5. Faith needs in times of crisis are much the same for children as for adults. The difference is not in the questions but in the language used to ask and answer them. (175).
6. Their feelings toward and about God are of paramount importance. (175)
7. We must be clear about what basic message we want to bring to this child at this time. (175)
8. It is not the time to worry about the child's doctrine. Avoid trying to reorient their system of theology. (175-176)
9. The goal of our pastoral care is to help the children relate to God as one who loves and care for them and always will do so. (176)
10. The important point is to provide reassurance. (176)
11. Do not talk *to* children but have children talk *with* us. (177)
12. Traps: To implicitly or explicitly dismiss children's concreteness or logical lines of thinking as irrelevant.
To dismiss their questions rather than admit we don't have the answer.
To answer all questions concretely....provide answers on their level. (177)
13. Instead: Take children's questions seriously and explicitly acknowledge them as important.
Be ready to admit we don't know the answer but without closing off discussion or showing disinterest
Help children move on to a more fruitful line of inquiry.
14. Use patience and gentleness.
15. Pastor's responsibility is to at least raise the issue of faith (179)
16. Start and end with the place of God in their lives at the moment (179)
17. Must understand how the child thinks God operates in the world generally (179)
18. Discern what the true intent of the question is: emotional or factual? (180)
19. Avoid seeing the child's question as theological when it is something more obvious. (181)
20. Determine how detailed an answer the child can digest. Give children pieces of information they can handle (181)
21. Generally children look for much shorter and more succinct answers than adults provide. Best strategy is to give a minimal answer to any question and allow the child to ask for more. (181)
22. Pick on point you feel is central to this child's circumstance (181)
23. Reflect tough questions back to the child and let the child provide answers. (181)
24. Be careful not to suggest that the child's feelings are wrong. (182)
25. Challenge beliefs that are not helpful to the child in coping with the situation. They need to hear alternatives to their own belief systems (182)
26. Offer alternative ideas – don't *impose* them (182)
27. Don't neglect prayer (182)