

WHERE ARE THEY GOING? WILL THEY RETURN?

Psalm 27:11-14

P: Teach me how to live, O LORD.

Lead me along the right path,
for my enemies are waiting for me.

C: Do not let me fall into their hands.

For they accuse me of things I've never done;
with every breath they threaten me with violence.

P: Yet I am confident I will see the LORD's goodness
while I am here in the land of the living.

C: Wait patiently for the LORD.

Be brave and courageous.

P: Yes, wait patiently for the LORD.

Gen15:1-12, 17-18(NLT)

Some time later, the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great."

2 But Abram replied, "O Sovereign Lord, what good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since you've given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. 3 You have given me no descendants of my own, so one of my servants will be my heir."

4 Then the Lord said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir." 5 Then the Lord took Abram outside and said to him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!"

6 And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith.

7 Then the Lord told him, "I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as your possession."

8 But Abram replied, "O Sovereign Lord, how can I be sure that I will actually possess it?"

9 The Lord told him, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 So Abram presented all these to him and killed them. Then he cut each animal down the middle and laid the halves side by side; he did not, however, cut the birds in half. 11 Some vultures swooped down to eat the carcasses, but Abram chased them away. 12 As the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a terrifying darkness came down over him

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Phil 3:17-4:1 (NLT)

Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those who follow our example. 18 For I have told you often before, and I say it again with tears in my eyes, that there are many whose conduct shows they are really enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 They are headed for destruction. Their god is their appetite, they brag about shameful things, and they think only about this life here on earth. 20 But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior. 21 He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stay true to the Lord. I love you and long to see you, dear friends, for you are my joy and the crown I receive for my work.

Where are they going? Will they return?

This message was inspired by several books and articles I have read over the years on the topic of why kids are leaving the church and not returning. While it is nothing new for 20 something's to check out of the church for a spell, the difference is that they are not returning as in the days of old when they got married and/or after having children. One big contributing factor is the change in our society. In the 50's it was just the social norm that most families in the US went to church on Sunday mornings. Even into the 80's this was still the norm, but we could see things were changing. I would venture to say, and I have read others propose, that there are just as many committed Christians in our country today as the "good old days" but the societal norms are no longer encouraging people to live by Judeo-Christian ethics. Nor are people encouraged to gather to worship God as often, if even at all.

I know, people still gather to worship in masses. It's just they are not worshipping the God of the universe. They are worshipping money, fame, sports, the list goes on. There was a movie not so long ago that had a line in its trailer that went something like this... "Do you really want to go up against these guys? The NFL owns a day of the week. The same day the Church used to own. Now it's theirs." Now don't get me wrong, most all of you here know my affection for football and hockey. I have even left after the 8am service a time or two to go to Soldier Field and watch the Bears

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beat up on the Lions. So, I'm not up here preaching that we can't enjoy sports, fame or even money.

While I was reading the suggested scriptures for this week, much of what I had read over the years about how we are losing whole generations of people came flooding into my thoughts.

I just had to stop and pray, even repent for my own failures.

I have to warn you before I share what I truly feel God is calling me to share today: I believe much of what I'm about to share calls me out as a father and spiritual leader and I have no doubt that many here today may feel the same convictions. Rest assured I am struggling through this with you today. The interesting thing about feeling convicted by the Holy Spirit is that we can choose to react to it in several different ways. We can deny the reality and ignore it, we can feel convicted and lash out at the messenger, or we can own it and ask God to help us act on what we just heard and felt.

It is my prayer that today you will choose the last option.

Believe me, I have not figured it all out and none of us will have all the answers this side of heaven. And that's the good news here: in spite of our struggles, Jesus has stepped into our lives to tell us, "You don't have to.... You can't fix it all. Just come to me, lay your burdens down, and I will walk with you till the end" and what a glorious end it will be.

So, with all those disclaimers in mind...

Let's continue to look at the big question, where are they going, and will they return?

I have yet to find the definitive, empirical study as to why kids leave church, although it is a very hot topic across the ecumenical world. But here is what we do know — kids are leaving! This is not news.

Many of our kids leave high school, go off to college, 'take a break' from church, and many never return, if they even get that far. So many "Get Confirmed" and then just disappear only to be seen on Christmas and Easter. The bad news — the Barna Group and other researchers point out that, for the first time in their ongoing studies of church life, many of these kids are not returning to the church.

Why is this happening? What can we do about it?

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In a recent article for the Christian Chronicle, Dudley Chancey writes; “Only God and parents really know how delicate children are. While many teens ‘commit’ their life to Christ, not much happens before or after that for many of our ‘churched’ teens. In sociological studies, a majority of moms and dads report that religion and faith are among the most important influences in their lives. And yet, over and over again, this is not lived out. The church — and particularly youth workers — get the blame for teens not being spiritual enough to make it on the outside.”¹

In the book *Why Christian Kids Rebel: Trading Heartache for Hope*, Tim Kimmel writes that “some kids see their parents treating faith like a hobby, so they follow suit.

We know that children’s perceptions of their parents’ religious beliefs — and the accuracy of these perceptions — influence the acceptance of these beliefs.”

Over and over in sociological research, parents (typically mom first and dad second) are the primary influence in kids’ lives. Youth ministers, preachers, church and youth groups are way down on the list, though they do have some influence.

So how can we parents fulfill our roles? It actually isn’t that difficult, it just takes time. In the book *Raising the Bar: Ministry to Youth in the New Millennium*, Alvin Reid reminds us that “only 34 percent of North American families eat one meal together each day. The average father spends eight minutes per day with his children. (That includes meals and watching TV.) Only 12 percent of families even pray together. The average couple spends only four minutes of uninterrupted time together a day.”

Simply put, we do not seem to have time for relationships. That’s what our behavior says to our children. Perhaps we are too busy, or we do not feel adequate to be the spiritual leader of our children. Remember it’s not in our own strength. God wants us to rely on Him and through Him we can do this.

¹ Why are kids leaving the church? The answer lies in parents
DUDLEY CHANCEY | for The Christian Chronicle
Sermon manuscript not edited for publishing

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Now I know many of you here today, and I know that you have a strong faith and that many of you are way ahead of the percentages. Take that as encouragement and praise God for what He is doing in your families and ask Him for the strength and conviction to continue or even grow stronger as a family of faith.

Do you remember our Genesis reading from earlier this morning?
“Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”

So, Abram presented all these to him and killed them. Then he cut each animal down the middle and laid the halves side by side; he did not, however, cut the birds in half. Some vultures swooped down to eat the carcasses, but Abram chased them away.

When was the last time God asked you to do all that work to earn His love, forgiveness, and approval?

He doesn't, we already have that! It's because of Jesus that all we have to do is come to the Father and seek His direction and rely on the power of the HS not our own strength, but the key is we need to come to Him and do it His way not our own. I know this can seem hard but it's only hard when we try to rely on our own strength to do this. Do you remember my message from last month on sharing your story? Well are we sharing our story with our kids? How did I encourage you to share your story or do that big scary thing; you know the E word (evangelism)?

The very first step was to depend on Jesus, right? Then it was to be real. Are we letting our kids see us depend on Jesus? Do we let them see the real us? Are we reminding ourselves and our kids that we are hopeless without Jesus? He's our Savior.

Are we living the gospel so that by our actions as well as our words we are telling the gospel? Remember what the gospel is, it's the good news that Jesus saved us and He is the one we rely on to do this thing called life.

What was the last thing I challenged you with? Do you remember? It was to get connected. We can't do this on our own. We weren't made to do it on our own. We were made for each other. We are the body of Christ.

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Our North American culture has always encouraged rugged independence and busy-ness. We have just gotten even busier as a culture and many of our priorities have changed.

Even way back in the day when many of our families were living on farms, the daily schedule was hectic.

When I was 13, I had the privilege to spend the summer on my cousin's dairy farm. It was a great experience and a fun summer with lots of long hours and hard work. We would get up at 4am and start the first milking. Then we would come in and get a home cooked breakfast.

Then we would go out and tend to the calves, the chickens, and whatever else we could get done before it was time for lunch and to start milking all over again. After lunch we would all have duties to get done and maybe an hour of free time to play, I was a kid after all.

Then it was dinner, devotions, and, you guessed it, time to milk the cows again. A quick wash up and off to bed. The only day this schedule changed was on Sunday. Instead of chores between breakfast and lunch, it was off to church and Sunday school. And I'll say the shorter services lasted 90 min if we were lucky. Then back for a quick lunch and time to milk the cows again.

Today most of us are not milking cows but the crazy schedule is just different stuff. Get the kids up and out to school, go to work yourself, get the kids from school run one kid to soccer practice, the other to dance, tumbling or music lessons pick up the first kid oh and don't forget the second (if you were able to leave them at their lessons). Rush home for dinner, do homework cause every good teacher knows that kids need 3-4 hrs. of homework.

Ok, I know it's not always like that and I love our teachers and can't imagine how they even get done what they do in the overcrowded classes with way too little respect and support. But it sure seems like all the high school students I know have tons of homework almost every night.

This is just one of the things I love about my son's school, teachers are not allowed to assign homework on Fridays because the school wants families to have quality time together on the weekends.

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Ok, so I went off on a little rant there, if you weren't aware, I enjoy some "A D Oh Shiny!" moments from time to time 😊

Maybe that's why I connect so well with David, Paul and Luther. But, I think you get the picture and I also want you to see that you are not alone in this hectic life. I struggle with this just as much if not more than many of you sitting here and I should know better, RIGHT?

Now don't think this is a new struggle either, remember the Passage from Philippians? Paul gives us the answer, pattern your lives after mine (Paul) and learn from those who follow our example. We are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. He doesn't tell us to pull ourselves up by our boot straps and try even harder. He reminds us that Jesus will take our weak bodies, transform us by His power not our own. Remember even the Christians in Philippi needed to be reminded about this and Jesus had been gone for less than 30 years!

While thinking about "family ministry" is not new, it is still not the norm in North American churches.

Many churches are basically doing the same thing society is doing — "dropping off the kids" so that others can show them what to do. We have put the concept of intergenerational ministry on the shelf. Sometimes we aren't even doing "big" church together. Some churches have separate worship services for youth, some find kids in worship too distracting or don't want to spend more than an hour at church on a Sunday morning. Many churches have even gone to advertising... come on this day or this night and you'll be done in 45min. I don't know about you, but I can barely get a good workout in at the gym in 45min, and I do that 3-4 times a week, when I'm at my best. Is it any wonder that our children have nothing vested in church when they walk out as high school seniors or even as freshmen?

You all know me and how important I feel Youth Ministry and Children's ministry are. But I also know that it's only an hour or two a week at best. Then Jr. High or maybe High School is over and then what? Some of our campus ministries attempt to keep that experience going, but if we check out the percentages of students at these colleges and then count how many attend the college-age Bible classes. Your heart just sinks.

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In the book *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, Mark Devries reminds churches that “there is no such thing as a successful youth ministry that isolates teenagers from the community of faith.” I am not advocating that we toss children and youth ministries from the church. I would strongly suggest that they be used as tools to fill in the gaps and help equip parents to disciple their children. Youth and children’s ministries can assist parents in their roles, but they can’t replace those roles.

Children will look as much like Jesus as we, their parents and fellow church members do. Kids will follow Jesus through high school, college — and for the rest of their lives — if they have parents that do likewise, and if they can see older Christians modeling that behavior. Even some secular researchers stress the importance of having a “community of shepherds” around our children. Shouldn’t that be the church?

We know that children rely on us parents and other adults around them for support and affirmation, but do we make time to sit with our children and tell them about the faith that sustains us. To help in this task, I recommend the book *Building Faith at Home* by Mark Holmen. This is not the definitive resource, but a good start.

Parents, bottom line, it is still our job to rear our children and teach them to have faith in God. Church leaders and members, it is our job to shepherd their souls and equip parents to do the same. We need to remember church and ministry are about equipping people to become mature in Christ.

The numbers do not lie. We are shrinking as a fellowship. I do not believe it is because of the economy, the culture, PotUS, SCotUS, video games, music or whatever the excuse may be this week. It’s about priorities.

Moms and dads, future parents, leaders and fellow ministers, rise up!
Let’s repent. Let’s recommit.

Let’s walk and talk and do our faith with our children.

Let’s lean on and depend on Jesus, His strength and never forget the wisdom from Proverbs 22:6 “Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it.” This is a Proverb so it’s wisdom, not an iron clad promise from God. We must remember we all have been

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given a limited free will. Some will choose to exercise that free will to go into a different direction. But if we want the best shot for our kids to live a Godly life this gives us the encouragement on how to best prepare them.

We have to disciple our own children and teach them to make disciples. It is a continuing process. We must not skip — or lose — a generation!

Resources:

***Why Christian Kids Rebel: Trading Heartache for Hope*, Tim Kimmel**
***Raising the Bar: Ministry to Youth in the New Millennium*, Alvin Reid**
***Family-Based Youth Ministry*, Mark Devries**
***It's Just a phase-So don't miss it*, Reggie Joiner, Kristen Ivy**

<https://lifehopeandtruth.com/relationships/parenting/train-up-a-child/>

