

Living *With* Lambs



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 16:1; Deut. 8:5; Pss. 30:1-9; 50:10-12; 127:3; Prov. 3:11, 12; Mic. 6:8.*

Memory Text: “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (*Isaiah 40:11, NIV*).

The Week at a Glance: To have children is to be a parent-steward. And God, in His Word, gives parent-stewards instruction on how to execute their responsibilities faithfully.

Children, indeed, are gifts from God; outside of life itself (both temporal and eternal), they are the most wonderful of all gifts. Yet, the greater the gift, the greater the responsibility upon those who receive the gift. Thus, a precious opportunity, and solemn calling, is open to all parents to share with their children the simple good news of Jesus' love and life-giving power. However important it is to impart to our children the good news of Jesus and what He has done for us all, children grasp truth first, not so much from what the Bible teaches but from what their parents live. This week we'll look at some of the instructions the Gift-Giver gave to those whom He gave such precious gifts.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 28.*

A Unique Stewardship

When God created the first human couple, He gave them dominion over the earth. Along with this stewardship, they were privileged to bear and rear children. The Bible considers children to be gifts from God. Actually, children belong to Him; parents are, therefore, accountable to God for the way they treat these offspring. “Children are the heritage of the Lord, and we are answerable to Him for our management of His property.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 159.

What do you think it means for children to be God’s “property”? Study Psalms 50:10-12; 127:3; Isaiah 43:1, 7; and 1 Peter 2:9 as you answer. How does this idea change the way we should perceive children? What do these texts tell parents about their responsibility and obligations toward their children?

Everything is God’s by right of creation and by redemption, as well. Though Satan claimed to be the rightful ruler of this planet after sin, God reclaimed His rulership of the world through Christ. This reclaiming includes everyone, even children. Parents must always remember whose children their children really are. This is certainly one case where no one wants to be deemed an “unjust steward” (*Luke 16:8*).

When you think of parenting as a unique stewardship, what insights come to mind? Why is this kind of stewardship different from every other kind? What might faithful stewardship of children mean? *1 Cor. 4:2*.

Good managers ask advice from the owner of the property they manage. Godly parents likewise seek through prayer and Bible study to be guided as they rear their children. Manoah and his wife asked the right questions “How shall we order the child [Samson], and how shall we do unto him?” (*Judges 13:12*).

Key Text: *Mark 10:14*

Teachers Aims:

1. To show that children belong to God, who created all things.
2. To explore the reasons for having children.
3. To explain parents' responsibilities in caring for their children.

Lesson Outline:

I. God's Property (*Ps. 127:3*)

- A. Children belong to God.
- B. Parents are responsible for teaching their children Bible principles.
- C. Parents must seek God's guidance in raising their children.

II. A Prayerful Decision (*Prov. 3:6*)

- A. Much prayer and thought should be given to the decision to have children.
- B. Couples should have children out of a desire to share their love for one another with those children.

III. Meeting the Needs of Children (*Prov. 22:6, Eph. 6:4*)

- A. Parents care and provide for their children just as the heavenly Father cares for us.
- B. Children are to be disciplined in a spirit of love and kindness.
- C. The home should be filled with affection, acceptance, structure, and boundaries.
- D. Children who are shown respect learn self-respect and become socially responsible.

IV. The Faith of Children (*Matt. 18:3-5*)

- A. The Lord teaches us to cherish and respect the faith of children.
- B. Faith is cultivated by emotional security.
- C. Learning to trust parents teaches children to trust in God's care for them.

Summary: Parents are responsible for teaching their children to be disciples of Christ. Through respect and proper care, children learn to trust God and develop wholesome relationships with others.

COMMENTARY

I. Introduction

This week we are focusing on how children are gifts from God. Some in your class may be in the process of rearing their own children, while some may have not yet conceived or adopted. Still others may not desire to become parents. Some may have painful memories of their own childhoods, and some may feel shame about how they have reared their children. Thus, it is important to be sensitive while teaching this topic.

Momentous Decisions

Throughout time, couples have generally expected to be parents. Children continued the family line, provided companionship, helped with work, and cared for aging parents. Like Rachel, women often connected their sense of value to bearing children (*Gen. 30:1*).

Consider these comments from married couples about to have a baby. Which ones represent good reasons for bearing a child? Which do not, and why not?

- 1 “We thought a child would help cement our marriage.”
- 2 “I’ve always wanted a baby since the time I played with dolls.”
- 3 “We love each other and want to share that love with a child.”
- 4 “We weren’t trying to get pregnant; it was an accident, really.”

Becoming parents is an important choice. The decisions about whether to bear or adopt children and how many to have should be thoughtful ones. What purpose would a child serve? Will God be honored if a new life is brought into the world? Do we have the emotional and physical resources and the long-term commitment to provide for all the needs of a child (*1 Tim. 5:8*)? Rearing children can be difficult in troubled times (*Mark 13:17*).

On the other hand, children have a way of helping families to be more affectionate, patient, and selfless. Few joys compare with joining the Creator in the formation of a new person and experiencing the wonder of life alongside a growing child.

What impact did infertility have on some Bible families? What do you think might have been done differently to ease these situations? *Gen. 16:1, 2; 30:1-9; 1 Sam. 1:1-20.*

Many couples struggle to understand why God withholds children from them. Much soul-searching, quarreling, and domestic turmoil often result. We should not judge such couples then or now too hastily. Sensitivity toward couples without children spares them from unfeeling remarks. They should receive accurate information and counsel when they ask for it and be given privacy to decide the best course to follow.

II. Rearing Children as a “Heritage From the Lord”

Many profess to understand that their children are a “heritage of the Lord.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 159. They are familiar with the verses studied in this lesson and can quote them to make their point. Along with having dominion over the earth, Adam and Eve were privileged to bear and rear children. However, we see many children who have not experienced a home that reflects the high honor of this privilege.

Ask class members how their parents (or another family member) portrayed to them that they were “an heritage of the Lord” (*Ps. 127:3*).

Monday’s study discusses the decision to have children. In considering the impact of infertility in certain biblical families, I (Sue) was reminded of a couple we knew 40 years ago who had difficulty conceiving. Having a child became an obsession to the woman, until finally she became pregnant. However, the reality of carrying the child, giving birth, and then actually caring for the child had been obscured by her desire for it. Years after the child’s birth, this woman confided to me that she really had not enjoyed motherhood and that she was sorry that she had had a child. Consequently, her husband had done the majority of the parenting.

Most couples desire to have children of their own yet are unable to conceive. In the last twenty years, Assisted Reproductive Therapy (ART) has become available to many such couples. It is not uncommon for ART to cost more than ten thousand dollars up to a six-figure number. The Division of Reproductive Health for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that ART accounts for approximately 1 percent of total U.S. births. Last reported in 2001, there were 421 ART clinics in the U.S. Of those, 384 clinics reported 107,587 cycles, with 40,687 live babies (<http://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/ART01/nation.htm>). The stress involved with ART, including financial pressures, can be overwhelming.

There are many ways, however, individuals or couples can care for children other than having their own. Have your class discuss some of these ways.

Tuesday’s study portrays God as a parent. Why is it so hard for some of us to envision God that way? Eva was 71 years old and a retired minister of a Protestant denomination. When I (Sue) met her at a retreat, I assumed she would describe herself as being close to God. One evening, after spending a day in required silence along nature trails and in rooms where we could pray and study, we came together to eat and to break our silence. It was then that Eva began to weep as she shared that for the first time in her life she realized she was God’s child and that He always had loved and cared for her. She confessed that because of her minister-father’s harshness and

Lessons From the Heavenly Parent

The Bible describes God as a Parent. Jesus called God “Father” and introduced Him in winsome ways (*Matt. 5:16; 6:9, 14, 15, 18*). God wants to be Father to each of us personally. This picture of God complements the view of those who grew up in loving homes, while those who had difficulty relating to a parent may have trouble trusting Him. All who come to God, however, are treated with the care that only this Parent, the most attached and nurturing of all fathers, can give. Before we parent our children, we must be *parented* by Him.

What parental responsibilities are seen in God’s relationship with His people? What guidance for parenting today does this provide?

God as Parent	Responsibility	Guidance for Our Parenting
Deut. 1:31, John 6:33-35, Phil. 4:19		
Ps. 32:8, Isa. 54:13, Hos. 11:3		
Deut. 8:5; Prov. 3:11, 12; Heb. 12:5-7		

God’s love especially helps parents who have invested heavily in their children only to have them reject values that are dear. “ ‘When Israel was a child, I loved him. . . . But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me’ ” (*Hos. 11:1, 2, NIV*). God experienced all the emotions parents know when teenagers ignore counsel, behave in disappointing ways, or turn their backs on home. He values human freedom. He can guide parents to know how or whether to pursue a wayward one or to acknowledge an adult child’s decision and wait, as did the father of the prodigal son (*Luke 15:11-32*).

How is God’s attitude toward those who reject Him helpful to parents in dealing with wayward children? In what way does knowing that He knows the pain of rejection bring comfort and encouragement to troubled parents?

disapproval, she had never felt good enough; and although she felt called to the ministry, she now realized she had never heard God speak to her before. Her earthly father was now deceased, but she was overjoyed finally to understand God's fatherly love for her.

As Ellen White shared the importance of kindness and firmness in dealing with children (see Wednesday's study), I am reminded of Eva. She never experienced the kind of warmth, affection, and sense of belonging that she yearned to receive from her father.

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Isaiah 40:11, Micah 6:8, Matthew 19:13-15, Luke 15:11-32, Ephesians 6:4*

- 1 No one develops in a vacuum. Ideally, our physical, emotional, and spiritual development take place in the context of a loving-family environment. What are your earliest memories of spiritual insights communicated by someone in your family? If you didn't grow up in a Christian home, how did you learn about God? Were all your impressions positive? Why, or why not?
- 2 The raising of children is unbelievably difficult. First, there are unnumbered *experts* giving often conflicting advice. Then, even the most conscientious parents sometimes have to watch while their children make unwise decisions that lead to disastrous consequences. What Bible promises can parents claim regarding their continuing influence in their children's lives? How do our experiences with a disobedient child mirror God's disappointment with us?
- 3 Jesus taught His disciples to address God as "our Father" (*Matt. 6:9*). What personality trait from an earthly parent gave you a glimpse into God's character? If you did not have a positive parental figure, who helped you understand what God is like?
- 4 Our children know whether our religious experience is genuine or not (and it is not based on our ability to rehearse a list of fundamental beliefs). How do you know your children have embraced your spiritual values for themselves? (*Read Micah 6:8.*) What's more influential: words or actions?
- 5 The goal of successful child raising is eventually to give our children more and more freedom, because self-control is the best control. What experiences can you share relative to giving your children more control over their own lives? What worked? What did not? What did you learn about the freedom God grants His children?

Doing What Is Good for Children

“He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (*Mic. 6:8, RSV*).

How should parents use these principles in regard to how they raise their children?

Ellen White elevated the importance of *kindness* and *firmness* in dealing with children: “The combined influence of authority and love will make it possible to hold firmly and kindly the reins of family government.”—*The Adventist Home*, p. 308. Current parenting research shows the significance of *control* and *support* to the development of emotionally healthy, well-functioning children. *Support* refers to demonstrations of warmth, affection, and sense of belonging that convey the respect of parents for children. *Control* has to do with parents providing structure, regulation, boundaries, and restraints in their children’s lives that help children respect themselves and others. “Kindness” and “support,” “firmness” and “control” express qualities within the biblical concepts of Micah 6:8.

Evaluate the parenting practices in these families: Jacob (*Gen. 37:3, 4*), Manoah and his wife (*Judg. 14:1-3*), Eli (*1 Sam. 2:22-25, 3:13*). **How could parenting with both firmness and kindness have made a difference? What practical changes would be necessary in order to incorporate both?**

Optimal parenting involves an abundance of warmth, affection, and affirmation, as well as appropriate limits, with realistic expectations appropriate to the child’s age. Rules are few, consequences are clear, and there is follow-through on consequences. In homes where firmness and kindness are found together, the likelihood that children will adopt their parents’ values is increased. They also will develop morally in keeping with their ages and be socially responsible and caring in relationships with others.

Perhaps he did not understand a child's need for structure (appropriate rules, boundaries, and discipline), along with nurture (an abundance of love, caring, laughter, devotion, and respect). Could it be that he was so concerned with her behavior that he missed a crucial part of his responsibility to her?

Jesus affirmed the faith of children (see Thursday's study). Our grandson, Alex, recently affirmed our faith. As we were driving along a U.S. highway to the Tennessee Aquarium in Chattanooga, we noticed a man lying on the other side of a chain-link fence with a white dog standing over him. What should we do? Considering the heavy traffic and the fact we were not familiar with the area, we decided to continue on, hoping someone more familiar with the surroundings would know how to reach him. After we had made our decision, Alex suggested that the driver of our car keep his eyes

Witnessing

A child's core concepts of life are formed by the influences of the home, which lay a nearly ineradicable foundation. Parents should seek to model a manner in which all the affections and thoughts are brought into captivity to the will of God. Lecturing, haranguing, and punishing will not be nearly as productive as a consistent example. Parental instruction is effective in proportion to its fidelity to Scripture, in word and deed.

In the context of this understanding, how can parents avoid

- 1 *blind affection* (leading to permissiveness) and *undue severity* (which crushes a child's self-respect and ability to attain healthy self-control);
- 2 *arbitrariness* (which is unsettling for lack of consistent rules) and *inflexibility* (which won't take into account extenuating circumstances)?

"Children cannot be brought to the Lord by force. They can be led, but not driven. 'My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me,' Christ declares. He did not say, My sheep hear My voice and are forced into the path of obedience. In the government of children love must be shown. Never should parents cause their children pain by harshness or unreasonable exactions. Harshness drives souls into Satan's net.

"The combined influence of authority and love will make it possible to hold firmly and kindly the reins of family government. An eye single to the glory of God and to what our children owe Him will keep us from looseness and from sanctioning evil." —Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, pp. 307, 308.

Ask yourself: "How can I improve as a parent (or mentor to the young) in the way I administer correction and instill right principles of conduct?"

Shepherding a Child's Heart

Research confirms what many parents and teachers know already—children do have an active spiritual life. They believe God is important in their lives. Jesus honored children and taught us about their spiritual development.

How did Jesus relate to children? What did He say regarding their faith? *Matt. 18:2-5; Mark 9:36, 37, 41.*

Jesus affirmed the faith of children. This faith can be cultivated by the emotional security caring parents provide. If it is safe to ask any question, to talk about any topic at home, then children will learn to be comfortable talking anything over with God. When home is a caring place where one's needs are met, when parents are both physically and emotionally available to children, the young readily learn that God can be counted on to care for them. When children are made aware of how precious they are to their caregivers, it will help them to understand that God values them too.

What was Christ's warning to those who would offend children or cause them to sin? *Matt. 18:5, 6; Mark 9:42.*

Attitudes or actions toward a child that emotionally or physically harm him or her make it hard for the young person to believe in or trust in God. When sexual abuse of a child takes place, especially by a parent, betrayal goes to the deepest places of the soul. What follows is an often-lifelong struggle to relate to the perfect love of God or to the affection of a mate. An experience with the grace of God; life in a healing, accepting environment; and the guidance of trained counselors have enabled many such individuals to cope with these scars.

How does your relationship with the heavenly Shepherd influence the shepherding of your flock? What changes would you like to make in your approach to your child or to the children with whom you live or work?

opened while everyone else closed their's to pray for the man. The three adults in the car were surprised that a seven-year-old was the one who wanted to bring this concern to the Lord. This was a child who knew it was safe to bring his needs not only to the Lord but also to his family.

When children are physically and emotionally cared for by the important adults in their lives, they flourish. Sadly, however, many children grow up with feelings of rejection. The result? Their relationships with others easily become troubled, including their relationship with God.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: “Charles Francis Adams, 19th century political figure and diplomat, kept a diary. One day he entered: ‘Went fishing with my son today—a day wasted.’ His son, Brook Adams, also kept a diary, which is still in existence. On that same day, Brook Adams made this entry: ‘Went fishing with my father—the most wonderful day of my life!’ The father thought he was wasting his time while fishing with his son, but his son saw it as an investment of time. The only way to tell the difference between wasting and investing is to know one’s ultimate purpose in life and to judge accordingly.”—Silas Shotwell, in *Homemade*, September 1987 (<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/c/children.htm>).

Thought Question:

“Christianity transformed life for the child. In the immediate background of Christianity, the marriage relationship had broken down, and the home was in peril. Divorce was so common that it was neither unusual nor particularly blameworthy for a woman to have a new husband every year. In such circumstances children were a disaster.”—William Barclay, “The Gospel of John,” *The Daily Study Bible*, Revised Edition, vol. 2, p. 81. While the church is not called to take the place of parents in the rearing of children, it does have a responsibility toward them. How can your church cater to the needs of children?

Application Question:

The family takes on different compositions—traditional families, single parents, parents without children, foster families, and others. Like the story in the icebreaker, there are many children with parents who see their role limited to providing food and shelter to children. How can your church take advantage of the different types of families represented in the church to maximize its ministry to its children?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “Misconception of the Mother’s Work,” *The Adventist Home*, pp. 244–247; “Discipline and Its Administration,” *Child Guidance*, pp. 221–268.

Younger members of the Lord’s family. “Your children are the younger members of the Lord’s family—brothers and sisters entrusted to your care by your heavenly Father for you to train and educate for heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 251.

One such correction enough for a lifetime. “Whipping may be necessary when other resorts fail, yet she [the parent] should not use the rod if it is possible to avoid doing so. But if milder measures prove insufficient, punishment that will bring the child to its senses should in love be administered. Frequently one such correction will be enough for a lifetime, to show the child that he does not hold the lines of control.”—Page 250.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In the previous passage “Whipping may be necessary . . .” list the principles found there regarding child discipline. What would you like to do differently in your relationship with your child?
- ❷ In your church are there children of single parents or children from homes in which there has been some recent turmoil? If so (and where appropriate), why not plan some activities in which your class can help these children?

Summary: Children are younger members of the Lord’s family. As responsible stewards, Christian couples seek God’s guidance in the decision regarding whether to be parents and in the number of children they can appropriately care for. God supplies an abundance of instruction in His Word for His parent-stewards. His own providing, teaching, and correcting of His people offer important instruction.