

Transcript of Sermon By
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 First Baptist Church
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Dedicated to God

1 Samuel 1:21-28

Meditation Text:

I read because *my* father read to *me*. And because he'd read to me, when my time came I knew intuitively there is a torch that is supposed to be passed from one generation to the next. And through countless nights of reading I began to realize that when enough of the torchbearers—parents and teachers—stop passing the torches, a culture begins to die.

—William Kilpatrick in *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong*

We are emphasizing our children and youth heritage today as a part of our 175th anniversary. To think about what this means to us, I would like to ask the question, *What do children and youth really need to survive, to be healthy, to be productive, and to have a good life?* Clearly, I think, they need safety. It is amazing to me to watch an animal, such as a horse or cow, give birth. When they give birth, within a few hours, the young colt or calf is up and running around. There is a certain amount of freedom that they already have. Considering they are only hours old, they are able to do incredible things.

How long does it take a human baby to come to the place where it can sit up on its own? About six months. When does a baby begin to crawl? Maybe a few months after that. Somewhere around the time a child turns a year old, they can do the diaper waddle and begin to walk. They are vulnerable for a long time.

When I was about five or six years old, my family went to an amusement park. When it was time to leave, I did not want to go home. My father, being very wise, said, *Fine. Stay. We are going, but you can stay.* I remember standing there, watching them go to the parking lot, thinking, *How do I get home from here?* After about 20 seconds, I am hoping I can catch them before they get to the car. I recognized that I could not do it by myself. I needed somebody to help me and keep me safe. In this, you can think about shelter, food, and all the things that are required in order to make it through the first few years. What else do we need?

If you kept a child in perfect safety, that still would not be enough. If you could protect a child and make sure they were never injured, never fell, never scraped their knees, and were never in danger from someone outside hurting them, that still would not be enough.

I remember several years ago, a member of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship world staff came and told us about a setting in Africa where under- class orphans were cared for. In my mind's eye, the room she described seemed like the locker room my school had when I was in junior high. There were shelves with baskets, but instead of gym shoes and gym clothes, there were babies. They were wrapped and put in their place. When it was their time, they were pulled out of the shelf, their diaper was changed, they were fed, and then put back on the shelf. That was the care they got. It was perfectly safe.

If somebody doesn't touch you, hold you, and nurture you, we know that people cannot live. We read all the time about people who have abandoned children or people who have gone off to Las Vegas and left their seven-year-old in a closet. For a child to have a good life, somebody has to love that child. Somebody has to care and touch those children. We have all probably encountered children who are starved for affection and they don't want to let you out of their sight. They want to just cling to you. Pure safety is not enough. Love and nurture must be a part of caring for a child.

I saw a statistic this week that stated the difference between opportunity and being a part of what the article described as the *underclass* is strictly education. In the information age, if you don't have some education you are destined for a very gloomy and dire future. A child has to learn, grow, and expand his mind.

Among other things, what about Jesus. We are in church. Do we say this just because we are in church and we are in the South and it's polite? We do the parent-child dedications and families stand up front in church on those Sundays. We say, *Do you believe that everybody needs Christ and the grace of God which he offers?* and the parents say, *We do.* Do we really mean it or are we just saying it because we are in church?

Our 175-year history is witness to the fact that we believe that. We believe that among the needs that children and youth must have in order to have the kind of life that anybody would want them to have, is Jesus.

Our church was formed in 1835, and for the first couple of decades leading up to the Civil War, there were occasions where we had Sabbath School, which was the precursor to Sunday School. In those days, it was always for children.

When the war came and church stopped, we came back to it, and for the rest of the 19th Century, it was mostly for children but was a way that the church invested in teaching the Bible to children so that they could know about Jesus. In the latter part of the 19th Century, Sunday School met at 3:00 on Sunday afternoon.

Around the beginning of the 20th Century, Baptists in many places, including this congregation, added Sunday night youth activities which, unfortunately, was given the name

Baptist Young People's Union, or those of you who are old enough to remember the initials, BYPU. Why would anybody name an organization something that ended with PU for kids? I can remember as a child thinking about joining the Methodist church because theirs sounded really cool. It was MYF as opposed to BYPU which sounded so terrible. But it was a part of the way that congregations could provide opportunities to train, grow, and disciple teenagers.

That is pretty much the way it rocked along until about the 1960's. If you noticed in the bulletin today, we have tried to list all the youth directors, ministers of youth, and children's ministers that we have known across the years. All of these are an indication of the church's commitment to helping to grow young people—children, older children, and youth—as Christians.

Today, we celebrate not simply history, but heritage. The difference between history and heritage is that history is all about what happened. Heritage is about what we have cherished and what we have done as a part of what we continue to do and are committed to do into the future. When we celebrate what has been, it is really as a way of committing ourselves today to what we continue to do.

We use the story of Hannah and her dedication to God and her desire for a child. She is given a son and she keeps a commitment that she made. If you read the entire first chapter of Samuel, Hannah keeps the commitment she made to give her son to God.

I personally find Hannah to be one of the most attractive mother examples in the scriptures. We learn a couple of things from her. One thing we learn is that it is very important to start early with teaching our children. She did not say, *By the time he is ready for middle school, I will bring him back*. She started as soon as it was possible and she brought him to Eli so that Eli might raise him in the way of God.

Maybe you have never thought about this before, but let me just give you an example. I don't recall ever talking to a four, five or six-year-old child about God and having that child say, *What are you talking about? That is the craziest thing I have ever heard*. Small children get it. Small children have a homing instinct that still seems to be intact. If you talk to them about God, it is like, *OK. What else? Tell me more*. But by the time a child gets to be 14, 15 or 16, if you have not had the conversation, and you start talking to them about God, they look at you like you have just dropped down from Mars. Teenagers still do come to Christ. They still start fresh and make it, but I tell you it is much easier to work with the youngest mind and heart where a child is open and trusting of the people that they are around. When the opportunity presents itself, it is so much easier to start early. This is what we see with Hannah.

If you are coming to a place in your life where your children are teenagers, it is not hopeless. There are a lot of older kids and teenagers who, indeed, respond very well, but I think we all know that it does get to be more difficult.

The second thing we learn from Hannah is that this is a lifetime commitment. I don't think any of us are going to bring our children to church and leave them. But the point is that it is a lifetime dedication. Verse 28 says, *Therefore, I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he*

lives, he is given to God. This is the hardest part, isn't it? If you have dedicated a child, it is easy on that day, but as they get older, everything else seems to butt in, doesn't it? There are decisions to be made multiple times a week. *Are we going to go to soccer practice or are we going to this faith-building opportunity? Are we going to do another sport or are we going to go to church and learn something about the Bible? Are we going to stay home because we have to study and make 100 on everything or are we going to go to a faith-building opportunity?* You can just name it. They all come in.

We know what happens. Invariably, all the things on this side begin to win. I have thought about how to say this without exaggerating, and I think this could be fairly accurate. If I had a dollar for every time a family said to me, *We won't be there because we have chosen this side*—school, dance, soccer, whatever it may be—I promise I could operate the Free Clinic, the Homeless Shelter, or the Community Kitchen for a month on the number of times I have heard people choose this.

On the number of times I have heard people choose the other side and say, *We skipped that to be here for this*, I could take a couple of you out to eat. This side always wins. If the truth be told, the thing that makes this side win is peer pressure. But irony of ironies, it is not peer pressure on the kids; it is peer pressure on the families to choose this side because somehow we have determined that if our kids don't do this, they are really missing out on life.

We know each other well enough to know what I am talking about. You know me well enough to know that I am not saying that you have to bring the child every time the door is open or there is no hope of him being a Christian. But I know you well enough to know that there are so many times that we just say, *It is important for a child to be Christian*, and then always choose Column A over here with the thought, *Eventually, it will be OK.*

What is the implied lesson? What is it that our children and teenagers observe when we make those decisions, not what we say but what they observe and pick up? The implied lesson is Jesus is fine, if there is time, but there are always these other things. When we dedicate children, I have to tell you that is a far cry from when we say, *Do you believe that all persons everywhere need Jesus Christ and the grace of God which he offers.*

I searched diligently for this illustration in my files but could not find it but I think I am close enough. I read a statistic about how many times a child gets their diaper changed when they are an infant. Those of you who are close enough to remember know it is a lot. The author said every time a child has a diaper change, it is an opportunity to hold that child close before you lay it down. It is an opportunity to talk kindly, gently, soothe, sing, pat, and nurture. It is an opportunity to pick that child back up and hug him again when the job is done. There are thousands of opportunities to love, nurture, and touch that child in a way that lets that child know before he can ever think the words, *I am loved.*

If we use that as our analogy, think about this: If you were to take Sunday school and worship, Sunday night opportunities, Tuesday mornings when the youth meet with John at Chick-fil-A, Wednesday night opportunities, and you went to an average number, say 100 opportunities a year, by the time the child gets ready to graduate from high school, there would

be nearly 2,000 opportunities to hear someone read the Bible, to hear someone pray for somebody else, to watch an adult—other than their family—be the hands of Christ, to have somebody say, *God loves you*, to be taught to sing a song that stays in their hearts about how much they love Jesus. When the day comes to drop that child off at college, or to put them on the military bus with a drill instructor that is not their mama and doesn't intend to be, what would you trade for 2,000 times that somebody could have helped instill faith in Jesus Christ in your son or daughter? Would you have traded a couple of soccer practices? Would you have traded a piano lesson? Would you have traded something to have given them that many more chances to be surrounded by the people of God and God's love that radiated through those people?

Do children and teenagers need Jesus? What does that mean about the decisions we make about their lives every day?

This would be a good place to stop, but this sermon has a twist at the end. I want to say one other thing. Children need Jesus, and the church needs children who know Jesus.

It is always sad to me when I talk to another pastor or someone who goes to another church and they say, *We don't have any children at our church. All the young people are gone.* What they are saying is, *Our church is dead. Our church is not as alive as it once was.*

Do you understand what it does to our faith when the children and youth stand up here and sing, when they participate in the call to prayer? When we see them and their young hearts and their enthusiasm, it helps us, doesn't it? It is not simply that children and youth are the church of the future. They are the church of the here and now. Where would we be without them?

Children need Jesus. Don't make any mistake about it, but always remember this, too. We need them to know Jesus because it makes us stronger and makes us better, too.

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