



Spiritual Development in the First Five Years

by  
Jeremy W. Steele  
JeremyWords.com



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# Baby Steps: Spiritual Development in the First Five Years

## Session 1 Grace in the First Year

Big idea: You are the agents of grace in the life of your child

1st Year Formation Goals: I can trust the world.

### **Grace Baptism and Your Family**

What is grace? There are many ways to understand the grace of God. A basic definition of the term is that God's grace is the unmerited favor of God. Easy enough, but how do we see and experience that grace? As a church we believe that grace is given to us, and therefore experienced by us, in three forms. The theological terms for the forms are: Prevenient Grace, Justifying Grace, and Sanctifying Grace.

Prevenient grace is sometimes referred to as the wooing grace of God. It is the unmerited favor that God extends to those who do not know him to woo them into a relationship. We all begin by experiencing God's prevenient grace. Jesus talks about God sending the rain to fall (in a good way... think crops) on the righteous and the unrighteous. God loves ALL his creation and wants every atom to follow his pattern. He wants every being to chose to love Him.

For every Christian, there was some point or process through which we chose to follow God with our life. This turning from sin and turning toward God is God's Justifying grace. The Bible makes it clear that when we decide to reorient our lives around Jesus, God forgives us from our sin and opens himself up to us in a unique and powerful way.

From then on, we experience the Sanctifying Grace of God as He continues to reveal to us how we can draw closer and closer to Him through holiness in thought, word, and deed. The bible talks about the fact that God offers special blessings to those who follow him. Those blessings are the experience of a deep, abiding experience of the presence of God.

Babies are at the very beginning of a life of faith. They cannot decide to turn to God, or even understand the idea of sin. That means that the grace of God they experience is his prevenient grace. Baptism is a celebration of that grace, and the sacrament of infant baptism is and expression of that grace. In that sacrament, the parents and the church agree to be agents of prevenient grace in the life of this child recognizing that when they are old enough, the child will confirm that commitment by choosing to respond to God's Justifying grace.

## **Where are you?**

These questions will help us get a sense of where we are in the spiritual process. Give the group some time to look them over.

Questions (Markers in parentheses)

1. How common was it to talk about spiritual things in your family growing up? (Never, Once a month, all the time)
2. How much of your personal spiritual development was related to your family? (None, Half, All)
3. How comfortable are you at talking about spiritual things at home? (Uncomfortable/silent on the subject, Timid but vocal, I am a domesticated Billy Graham)
4. Where do you feel you are on your spiritual journey? (I am new to the faith, I've been around a while but not clear, I am knowledgeable and experienced)
5. How much have you thought about what you will do to nurture your child's soul in the first five years? (Nothing, a little bit, I know everything I will do)

Make it active: Ask the class to get up. Having placed three markers (left, middle and right) on one wall read a question and label each of the positions with one of the available answers. Instruct each person to stand anywhere on the continuum created by those markers that describes their answer to the question.

## **Developmental stage: Trust vs. Mistrust**

At this point in the life of a child, everything is simple and totally centered around the child. There is no abstract thought, and not much concrete thought either. They experience their world almost totally in the immediate present. For a while, if things disappear from their sight, they cease to exist in their brain though by the third or fourth month they begin to have a sense of the permanence of objects with a clear sense by the end of the first year.

The overriding question about their world is can I trust the world? This is fundamentally related to whether or not their needs are being met. When they hurt are they soothed? When they are hungry are they fed? It is simple, but it has profound implications for the rest of their life and faith. This sense carries forward as their fundamental orientation towards the world: can the world, people, God, etc be trusted or not? If they go through this phase without gaining a sense of trust for the world, it is very difficult to develop further.

You've seen it or heard it in adults. The person who views everyone in their world as out to get them or who thinks that God is doing the same thing is struggling with this developmental issue of trust vs. mistrust.

Read Proverbs 3:5; Proverbs 16:20 and discuss it with these questions

1. What does this scripture reveal about trusting God?
2. How does what you've discovered about this first year reinforce what Scripture is saying?
3. Share a situation in your life where your trust in God has brought blessing?

As with each age level we will be talking about, how you parent in general is going to be directly relating to how your child sees God. You are the person in their life after whom they will model their idea of God. This stage is has the least number of practical spiritual formation exercises to work on as your child's mind has not developed to the point that there are many ways for you to interact with them. Most of these exercises are about creating a loving, God-centered home for them to experience the love of God through your love and care for them. It is also about helping you begin a pattern of spiritual formation focus when interacting with your child.

### **Sing to your child:**

Spend time practicing some simple spiritual songs together: Jesus loves Me, etc.

### **Show them beautiful things and point them to God**

Throughout this year in their life, they will be interested in things that have high contrast in color and interesting shapes. Take a moment and think about your house, yard, car, and daily routine. What can you pause a moment or two in front of and say, "God is so good! Look at this beautiful \_\_\_\_\_ he created!"

Beautiful, interesting things in our world to notice:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

When you are done, share your list with the group.

### **Prayers for the future:**

You will have their whole life to be praying for their immediate situation: how they are seeing you, whether they are becoming a moral person, who their friends are, etc. Outside of a case of the sniffles or two, most of their first year will be free of these thoughts for you. This is a unique opportunity to spend focused time praying for their

future. Use the following questions to talk about the person you want your child to become:

1. What would you hope your child is known for most as they grow up?
2. What are things you struggled with in your life that you hope to be able to help your child steer clear of?
3. What are some of the positive traits in your friends, family, or spouse you hope your child takes on as their own?
4. What are some of the positive traits about yourself you hope your child takes on as their own?
5. What other dreams do you have for your child?

Use this information to fill out the Prayers for Your Future card and think of a place you can set it where you will have a moment or two to reflect while you are with them.

Card will have these sections:

I pray that you become:

I pray that you are like (people):

I hope and dream that you will:

## **Parent Spiritual Development**

Trusting God can be difficult. Life is hard and when people experience its deepest pain, it can cause their trust in God to slip, yet as they experience the total, naive trust in their child it can remind them of the trust they desire (though they may have lost it) to have in God.

Trust is the place to begin in developing or strengthening a relationship with God, and the beginning of that road may be within the parent themselves. When they look at their child, that parent knows they want the best life for their beautiful baby. Though life may be difficult, though their child may have to suffer consequences and pass through difficult times, those parents will do everything in their power to help their child have the best life possible. That little baby can trust in that. They can trust that their parents love them and want the best for them. How much more trustworthy is the God whose trustworthiness has been proclaimed for centuries?

Life is messy. There is not a simple easy answer to why the world is so broken and why such horrible things happen. But just as that baby can trust in the love of their parents

and the parents' resolve to give them the best life possible, we can trust in the same from God.

Ask them to ponder these questions this week and discuss them with their spouse or close friend:

When have you had a hard time trusting God?

What made trusting God difficult?

What needs to happen for you to trust God more than you do right now?

## **Session 2 (18 months to 3 years) Beginning a “My” Faith**

### **Developmental Stage: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt**

This is the first of many trying stages in the life of your child. As they grow through this stage they will begin to venture out on their own, and even start satisfying some of their own needs by trying to feed themselves, dress themselves, etc. The goal in this stage is to instill a sense of autonomy at the most basic level.

While they still need to be protected against things that are dangerous or harmful to them, we can overdo the protection (as weird as that may sound). Parents who are too restrictive at this stage refuse to allow them to perform tasks they are capable of doing, ridicule early attempts at those tasks, or demand too much too soon. However, if that self-sufficient behavior is encouraged, a sense of being able to handle problems on their own begins to take deep roots, and that will pay huge dividends in their future.

### **A World of Faith to Explore**

As they are branching out and exploring their world, we want it to be filled with faith elements for them to explore. Take a moment to make a list with the items below and then share with your group what you have found.

1. What were some of the tangible faith-related items you can remember from your early years?
2. What types of books do you have or have you seen that are faith-focused and durable enough for children at this age?
3. What non-book items have you seen that are safe for this age and faith-focused?

### **Learning the Words of Faith**

Language is another frontier of development that opens up at this stage. Though they will not be constructing their own stories at this point, they will be beginning to learn individual words and phrases and may begin to express themselves in simple sentences. The faith goal here is the same as everywhere else. We want faith to be infused into every element of their life and development. That means this is the time for scripture to be introduced.

It is important to remember that simple sentences are the key. That means: subject, verb, predicate. Anything too complex will be more than they can understand. Let's take a moment to try our hand at distilling a Bible story into its core meaning and expressing it in three to four simple sentences.

1. Take a moment to read the story of Noah in Genesis 6-8. If you already know the story make sure you notice two things: Noah never speaks, and a repeating theme

(seen clearest in 6:22 and 7:5) is that Noah obeyed God. Now decide on the main point you see in the scripture (there are several valid options).

2. As a group decide what elements of the story are most important.
3. Develop three to four simple sentences to convey they point and the elements you decided upon.
4. Share them with the rest of the class.

This is the type of material you are looking for at this age. Simple sentences, simple messages, and bright pictures.

### **Prayer in the Second Year**

Prayer is another great way to engage their language formation with faith. In the beginning of this year, you can try and include it in their bedtime routine. You can pray with them using those same simple sentences and basic concepts we talked about with the Scripture. By the end of this year, you may be able to get them to repeat some of the prayers after you!

1. What are some of the things they will be struggling with in this stage? How can you pray for those things?
1. What are some other things you would like to pray for them in this stage?
2. How might you express the first and second set of issues in simple sentences when you are praying with them?

### **Continuing practices**

Look back at your notes from the first year. What faith practices did you see there that you would like to continue as they get older? How might this change in this developmental stage?

### **Parent Spiritual Development:**

Life with a new baby is a whole new level of time needed. Even those who have had the most tried and true habits of spending personal time with God can find those routines slipping in the haze of sleep deprivation and dirty diapers.

Just as it is important for our children to develop autonomy in their spiritual lives, it is necessary for our faith to be based on our action rather than the actions of the people in our world. Our faith is to be ours and not our pastors, or our parent's or our spouse's. Our faith needs come from our own, independent (autonomous) seeking.

God does not expect us to spend eight hours a day in intensive study with another six in deep prayer. God merely wants us to seek him on our own, and the beautiful thing is that no matter how much of our time we give him, he will reward that with his presence.



As a group discuss: what are some of the things you have done in the past that you felt connected you with God? How have you autonomously sought him?  
Ask them to ponder these questions this week and discuss them with their spouse or close friend:

When can you carve out a couple moments to spend with God?

When will you start that?

Is there anything you need before you can start?

## **Session 3 (3-5 Years)**

### **Part of God's Story**

#### **Developmental Stage: Initiative vs. guilt**

Though this next stage (from 3-6) spans a bit more time, it has one primary goal developmentally speaking: Initiative vs. guilt. Building on autonomy, initiative adds the ability to undertake, plan, and attack a task. They are learning about the physical world around them (things fall down not up... round things roll) and understand that there is a progression to it. They understand story and begin to see their life and world as a story. They learn how to zip, button tie, and communicate their meaning clearly through words.

This is the moment when children will begin to exhibit risk-taking behavior and will try and confront problems that may be outside their realm of ability. The goal is to encourage and support these behaviors and help them make realistic and appropriate choices. If parents dismiss these initiative-developing behaviors as silly or discourage them altogether, children can develop a sense of guilt about their needs and desires,

#### **Imagination-Central**

Preschool is when you will notice an explosion in your child's ability to imagine. Not all of this initiative behavior will take place in the real world. Many times, your child will create imaginary obstacles that will be overcome by characters they create or that you have become. Faith can be a part of it. One of the great ways to engage faith in this stage is to act out the stories of the Bible with your children.

Take one or two of the stories from this list and use the questions to think about what types of things you can do to make them a fun imagination game:

David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17)

Samson (Judges 13-15)

Queen Esther Saves the Day (Esther 5-7)

1. What is the basic plot of the story?
2. What sorts of costume pieces might be appropriate? Can you make them together?
3. What types of everyday items might be used as props to make imagination more fun?

One note about this kind of imaginary play: Feel free to allow your children to branch out beyond the plot line or make different decisions. Not only will they enjoy that freedom, but it can lead to interesting (and sometimes difficult) conversation afterwards when you talk about how your version was different than the one in the Bible.

## **Why?**

Right now, they are discovering cause and effect on many levels. They are discovering that there are rules (like gravity) that govern the actions of physical objects; likewise, they are discovering that people generally have rules or principles that govern the way they act and react to situations. As they discover these reasons, it will help them to know how to confront and succeed in the tasks they undertake. This act of discovery will often take the form of a one word question: Why. This is an extremely formative question as you are giving them in your answers the rules for how the world works. We are going to do two exercises to help develop our "why" muscle.

Pair up. Decide who will be the parent, and who will be the child and take the Bible story out. The adult will begin reading and the child will occasionally ask a why question about the story. The person playing the adult should try and explain in a simple way the answer. After a few minutes switch roles and stories.

Debrief with your group:

1. How easy was this for you overall?
2. What were some of the more difficult "why" questions to answer?
3. What made those questions difficult?

Now, take a moment to consider the following questions and share them with the group afterwards.

1. What are some basic principles about how the world works you want your child to understand?
2. What are some of the basic values about how one should live that you want your child to understand?
3. What are some of the things that happen in the world that you want your child to know are not acceptable?

## **Prayer from 3-6**

This is the time for you to help your children understand that they can pray to god in many ways. There are some times when you can use pre-written prayers to express your heart to God while there are other times when it is best to use your own words to talk to God. Use the following questions to think about your prayer time in this stage.

1. What were some of the pre written prayers/blessings that were important to you in your early faith development?
2. When did you use these prayers as opposed to speaking off the top of your head?
3. What do you think was good/bad about that? Would you do the same with your children?
4. How can you encourage initiative even when using pre-written prayers?

## **Parent Spiritual Formation**

Once you have a bit of trust and are spending time with God, the next step is to begin to stretch yourself by taking reasonable, trust-based risk. That risk is usually best when it matches the amount of trust and time you have invested in your relationship with God. If you are just beginning (or restarting), the kinds of risk you are going to be taking should be small. It's not time to quit your job and move to Africa. Maybe it's time to volunteer one afternoon with Habitat for Humanity or begin giving to the church.

Whatever it is, a sign that you are a healthy, growing Christian is that you are taking reasonable, trust-based risk in your relationship with God.

Ask them to ponder these questions this week and discuss them with their spouse or close friend:

How much trust do you have in God?

How much time have you invested in the relationship?

What kinds of risks do you think match the level of trust and autonomy you have?

Which one of those will you pursue?

## Session 4 Panel Discussion

### Parent Spiritual Development:

#### Tips for an Awesome Panel Discussion

1. Select a couple sets of parents that have older (college or adult) children that turned out relatively healthy and successful.
2. Try and select parents with drastically different parenting styles.
3. Ask for questions ahead of time and email them to the parents involved in the panel.
4. Suggest that the parents in the panel forward those questions to their children.

You cannot do it alone. We need each other to help us grow closer to God and figure out what in the world to do when our kids lie for the first time. Take a moment to look at the opportunities our church has to connect with other people and make a commitment to become part of one of those groups or one similar to them.

Please help me make this resource better by sending feedback to [unpretending@gmail.com](mailto:unpretending@gmail.com) What worked? What didn't? What did you change to make it better in your setting?



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