

When Your Child Doubts GOD

"Why does He permit evil?... ignore my prayers?" A noted clergyman tells how to answer these questions when they arise in your home

by BISHOP JAMES A. PIKE

as told to Lester David



Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of California, whose ABC-TV program has won a Robert E. Sherwood award.

A WOMAN CAME to me recently in considerable distress. "My husband and I are shocked," she said. "Our son—he's 12—has told us a dreadful thing. He said he doesn't believe in God."

I astounded her with my reply. Instead of wringing my hands, I said, "It's a wholesome sign."

At some time in their lives, many children voice a degree of skepticism about religion. Don't be agonized, though. This questioning is healthy. It's proof that they are beginning to think for themselves about religion.

A child's faith will be stronger after it has been tested and proved. He will no longer believe it's the thing to do, but because he *wants* to; because he sought answers and found them himself.

How should parents handle a child's doubts? Here are three important rules:

1. Don't recoil in horror. This kind of reaction will only make him retreat into silence, bottling up his questions for fear of shocking the family. The child must feel free to ask whatever is troubling him without chastisement or ridicule.

2. Give honest answers. Don't offer glib replies which won't stand up as the child grows older and more perceptive. Don't put off a child by saying that the subject isn't fit for him to discuss. And if you don't know an answer, say so frankly and get aid from your minister.

3. Let him spar back and forth with you. Don't insist on instant acceptance. Don't be upset if he does some verbal fencing. This means his mind is working. He'll emerge with deeper understanding.

As parents know, children are apt to ask some pointed questions when their logical little world starts to unravel. For example, a key question put

to many parents is: "I was very good and I prayed hard for a bicycle (or dog or whatever) and didn't get it. Why?" My own daughter Connie voiced this one: She had prayed for a horse and it just never floated down from the sky.

In reply, we can tell our children: "Sometimes God doesn't give us things before we are ready for them. We must always leave the answers to our prayers up to God."

"Then again, often our prayers will be answered, although not in the specific way we expect or want. God may give us other wonderful blessings even better than the things we asked for."

"When we pray, we must always bear in mind those words from the Lord's Prayer, 'Thy will be done.' This means we should not ask God to do what we want, but accept His will."

"Of course, prayer is much more than asking for things. It is a way of being with God, of coming closer to Him, of talking to Him directly."

Children may also wonder, as Connie did, how God can hear all those prayers with everyone talking at once. "All those millions and millions of people talking—doesn't it all sound like gobble-gobble-gobble?" she asked.

I replied: "God is so big, so loving and so eager to hear all of us that He can listen and understand everyone at the same time."

STILL ANOTHER basic question revolves around good and evil. It may be put this way: "If there is a God and He is so good, why does He allow so much evil in the world?" Or like this: "My Mommy and Daddy are so good—why does God send us so much trouble?" Or it may involve

a single happening: "Why did God let Aunt Martha die? She never hurt anybody."

I don't blame parents if they are stumped by this. Whatever way it's worded, this is one of the most difficult questions in all theology. Though there may be no completely satisfactory reply, I would tell a child this:

"We know there is much evil in the world—wars, sickness and the like. But a good God is also a God who lets us all be free. This means that He allows human beings to do what they want. So many evil things come about because people use this freedom they have in the wrong way."

"But we, in our family, are going to use our freedom in the *right* way—by doing good, being good and loving God."

"Some people who do evil things only hurt themselves. If they drive cars too fast, for instance, they may crash and die. Of course, they may also hurt others who are innocent. Why should the innocent die? Why did Aunt Martha have to die?"

"Well, there are some answers we just don't have, some mysteries we don't understand. These mysteries are part of the wonder of religion. We must trust, because we know that God will give us the strength to live through the things we find so hard and so sad."

Perhaps, in the final analysis, the best way to convince a child that there is a God, good and loving, is to bring Him into your daily life, live with Him and work with Him. The example that you set in the way you live, especially in your attitude toward children, reveals very clearly to a youngster that your own belief in God really makes a difference.

COVER:

Today's cover by Pete Hawley is in keeping with the international trend toward cultural exchange: the lass gets to taste Fido's diet by letting him have a lick of her lollipop.

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