

Christian Advice to a Young Sudanese (and to his/her family)

God has placed every one of us in a family. We all had a father and a mother. This is no accident. *God has placed us within the family He wants us to be trained by.* It is His will. The family and the community are very important to God, just as they are to the Sudanese. When we are born again into the Christian family we join a second community. Sometimes this may lead us into conflict with our blood relations.

A biblical overview of Jesus and his family

Jesus had no human father. Such a miracle is not too difficult for the God who created our world! Jesus' young virgin mother, Mary, was "found to be with child through the Holy Spirit", Matthew 1:18. Interestingly, the fact Joseph knew the baby was not his shows they were *positively waiting for sex until after their marriage.* They were waiting for God's time.

Eight days into Jesus' life, at His naming and circumcision ceremony, Mary was warned she would suffer painful anguish as a result of her Son's destiny, Luke 2:34-35. Our children will bring us heartaches as well as much joy.

Jesus' parents were careful to bring Jesus up in the way God required them, Luke 2:39, 41. The child Jesus could thank God for His godly upbringing. God used Mary and Joseph to mould Jesus into the young teenager that he was, verse 40.

At twelve years old Jesus shows **two keys to maturity.**

In Luke 2:46 Jesus:

1. listens to, and
2. asks questions of, the Scripture teachers of his day.

Note that He humbly does this, even though He has an insight and understanding well beyond His age, verse 47.

At this moment a *misunderstanding between Jesus and His parents* develops—not the first or the last time teenagers and their parents do not see things the same way!

Jesus understood His relationship to God the Father as the number one priority in life. His devout and loving parents found this hard to accept, Luke 2:49-50. The Old Testament story of 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11 encourages *parents to release their children to the Lord*, 1:28. After all, it is ultimately God who gives us our children.

Jesus remained obedient to Joseph and Mary despite this difference they went through, Luke 2:51. He knew God's will for human families from God's Law:

- Exodus 20:12
- Deuteronomy 5:16
- later applied in Ephesians 6:1-3.

To "honour" means to respect, to praise and to admire your parents. Without your parents you would not be here!

Luke 2:52 describes Jesus as a balanced and maturing human being, showing God's beautiful grace and mercy throughout every aspect of His life.

Pray you can become more like Jesus in this way.

Examples from the Old Testament of parents being urged to teach their children at home about God's great salvation:

Exodus 12:26-27

Exodus 13:8, 14

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Deuteronomy 6:20-25

As children and young people we can encourage our parents by learning from them about God's works in the Bible and in their own lives.

The tension between His human and spiritual families emerges several times in Jesus' life and teaching:

1. Matthew 10:34-38 (also 10:21; Luke 12:51-53; 21:16-17) membership of God's Kingdom may bring alienation from your human family. Loyalty to Jesus, and loyalty to heaven, may mean going against what your earthly family wishes for you.
2. Matthew 12:46-50 (also Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21) Joseph is presumed dead as he is not mentioned. Jesus knew family sorrow as we do. But He emphasises that His new Kingdom community turns our values, which are merely human until we are Christian, upsidedown.
3. Matthew 13:55-57 Jesus had younger brothers and sisters. This fact does not change His divinity. Jesus was doubted by a group wider than just His family. His hometown folk did not believe He was anyone special.
4. Matthew 15:4-6 (also 19:18-19; Mark 7:8-13) Jesus clearly upheld the Ten Commandments and the necessity of honouring parents. He warned of the danger of making "spiritual-sounding" excuses. Sometimes fine words are spoken simply to avoid taking God-given responsibility towards parents.
5. Matthew 19:4-6 Jesus quoted from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 to teach God's design for marriage. Note it is sexually exclusive. It also includes "leaving" the old family when forming the new.
6. Mark 3:21 Jesus' family wanted to stop Him from bringing shame onto them all. Later they were worried about Him going to Jerusalem for similar reasons, John 7:3-5. Jesus resisted their pleas. He would do God's will even if it clashed with His human family.
7. Mark 10:29-31 (also Luke 18:29-30) For us, whatever family cost is involved in following Jesus, it will be outweighed by the rewards of the Kingdom—which, it should be noted, include persecution.
8. Luke 14:25-35 Jesus does *not* teach us to "hate", to totally dislike, our families. God's Law, which Jesus fulfilled, teaches the exact opposite, Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16. But compared to our love for Jesus, the love we have for *any* human being must be a lot less. We may be accused of "hatred" by those who do not understand. I remember my dad stopping me training for the Christian ministry when I was 18 years old. He made me get a business qualification first. After three years of very hard study I qualified for work in banking—and my dad immediately withdrew his objection. He had

proved my calling was from God. Looking back, I thank God for what dad did, although at the time I did not like it !

9. John 2:4 The title “Dear woman” Jesus uses instead of “mother/mummy” shows there is a distancing, even for this unmarried man, between His human blood family and the Kingdom family. Jesus was choosing to follow God’s timetable, not His mother’s.

John 19:25-27 shows wonderful care and provision for Jesus’ mother. Even from the cross, Jesus made sure that Mary’s needs were going to be met, by one from the wider Kingdom family. He was binding up His mother’s sword-pierced soul, Luke 2:35. The needs of Jesus’ mission and the needs of Mary His mother were not mutually exclusive.

The whole Bible is instructive about family life. The big picture behind everything shows God as the Father, with Israel—His chosen—as His bride. The bride is not faithful, but God still works towards winning her back to Himself. God uses the loving judgement of discipline followed by forgiveness. (See Ezekiel 16 for one example; also Luke 15:11-32).

God’s taking of just one bride, Israel, shows that monogamy is His will for human beings. The polygamy of the Old Testament describes what was happening. It is not an example for Christians to follow.

The New Testament shows that the household was still reflecting God as Father, Ephesians 3:14-15. The household was the context:

- for Christian worship, Acts 2:46; Acts 5:42; Romans 16:3-5; Colossians 4:15.
- for Christian teaching, Acts 18:26; 1 Corinthians 14:35; Ephesians 6:4.
- for outreach, Acts 5:42; 10:24, 44-48; 16:14-15; 16:31-34; 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:14-16,
- and for testing church leadership, 1 Timothy 3:2-7,12.

The whole church is pictured as “God’s household”, Ephesians 2:19.

In Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8 **young people are encouraged to enjoy life to the full**, always keeping in mind their Creator’s will and their ultimate accountability to God for the choices

they make. Notice the word, “before” in 12:1,2 and 6. It encourages us to *decide to live God’s way from as young an age as possible*. We do not have to do what others—our peers—around us are doing (see the following examples). God’s young people can—and should—be different!

Every experience in life brings consequences which then have to be lived with. Taking a stand for Christ after things have gone wrong does not remove those consequences. It is better to stand for Christ early in life and seek to avoid those meaningless bad experiences altogether.

Our parents’ faith will never save us! We cannot blame them, nor presume upon them. We need our own stand for God.

Examples of younger people who chose to follow God are:

1. **Joseph** ran away from sexual temptation rather than give way to it, Genesis 39:6-10. Joseph was earlier rejected by his own brothers, but he did not let that come between him and his God. Verses 21 and 23 show how God honoured Joseph even through wrongful imprisonment. God is always faithful to His people.
2. **Moses** chose to give up the privileges of his upbringing and to side with the people of God, Hebrews 11:24-26. He realised God had used his parents. They took great risks while bringing him up, Hebrews 11:23. (See also Exodus 2 and 3).
3. **Gideon** was still working for his father when God called him to lead the nation, Judges 6:11-16. He bravely worked on despite the Midianite raiding parties. He also acted against his own father’s worship of a false god, 6:25-27. God showed His greatness by using that same father’s wisdom to protect Gideon from the anger of their larger family, verses 28-32.
4. **Ruth** overcame the sad loss of her first husband and chose to be loyal to her husband’s mother and people, as well as to God, Ruth 1:3-5; 1:16-18. God provided for

her through tough times and she ended up remarrying. Her child was ancestor to King David and eventually to Jesus Christ, Ruth 4:13-17; Matthew 1:1-17!

5. **David** was too young to fight for Israel against the Philistines. He went to the battle field taking food supplies for his older brothers. There, he discerned Goliath's threats were not only against Israel but against the will of God. So David fought Goliath in God's way—and he won! 1 Samuel 17:17-26; 17:50. His brothers and king Saul tried to discourage David, 17:28,33. David risked his life because he was confident in God, 17:45-46.
6. **Jonathan's** friendship for David meant he had to stand against his father, king Saul, 1 Samuel 20:30-42. Jonathan discerned what his father did not, that God was choosing David to be king of Israel. Sometimes family loyalty has to be set aside to follow God. But notice the respect shown in 2 Samuel 1:23-27.
7. Orphan girl **Esther** risked her own life and position as queen, to stand up for her people against the king's wicked attempts at ethnic cleansing, Esther 2:2-3; 2:7-10; 4:11-17; 7:3-4. God put her there for His purpose.
8. **Daniel and his three friends** would not break God's dietary rules even as displaced people in the service of foreign royalty, Daniel 1:3-8. Again notice how God will always honour people who choose to stand out for Him, verses 9,15-17.
9. **Saul/Paul** let God change his life right around, Acts 7:58-8:1; Acts 9:1-22. As a young man he was totally committed to his beliefs. But a vision of Jesus completely changed his mind and revolutionised the direction of his life. Later on in his life God used his upbringing, but Paul had to learn where it was wrong first of all, 2 Corinthians 11:22; Acts 26:15-23.
10. **Timothy** was well thought of by the churches of his home area, Acts 16:1-2. Paul recognised this and gradually brought him into ministry. First Timothy joined Paul's travelling team, Acts 16:3-4. Then he was trusted to run important errands, 1 Corinthians 4:16-17; 1 Corinthians 16:10-11. Finally, at the right time, Timothy was left on his own with the responsibility to pastor the church at Ephesus, 1 Timothy 1:3-5.

None of these men and women were perfect! Joseph was arrogant towards his family, Genesis 37:1-11. Moses disobediently doubted God, Exodus 4:13. David fell into sexual sin, 2 Samuel 11. Esther encouraged Jewish revenge killings, Esther 9. Sinners are always capable of making mistakes!

But these younger people all *put God's will over and above everything else* at the start of their life and work for God.

The advice Paul gave Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12 is relevant to our study:

*"Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but **set an example for the believers** in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity".*

The context which helps us correctly understand and apply this verse follows it in the chapter.

Always look for:

- scriptural understanding and application, verse 13
- gifting by God, verse 14
- sincere commitment, practically worked out, verse 15
- careful determination, verse 16.

We learn that our lifestyle speaks more truly than any words we say.

Speaking Christianity is easy. Living Christianity is not.

Psalm 119:9 says that every young person who chooses to live the way God's word tells them to, will live a pure life in God's sight.

Proverbs 6:20-24 says there is wisdom in the teaching we receive from our parents. God will use it to help form and direct our lives. We must listen to it.

Timothy was warned to keep well clear of the unrestrained desires of youth, 2 Timothy 2:22.

We must heed that warning too. If we don't we may ruin our (and someone else's) future.

Children who honour and obey their parents are promised special blessings from God, Ephesians 6:1-3.

As we study the Bible on this subject we discover there are no easy answers.

A Christian disciple is basically one who follows the Lord Jesus.

- Jesus valued His upbringing.
- Jesus did not let the world He lived in decide things for Him. He showed He was different from the world.
- Jesus chose to follow God's will, paying the ultimate price.
- Jesus took great care to provide for His mother's physical and spiritual needs.

May we be children of our Heavenly Father, showing His characteristics in our daily lives.

Discussion guide.

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. Share things you can thank God for in your own upbringing.
2. What can be learned about family responsibilities from the 12 year old Jesus and His parents¹ in the temple incident, Luke 2:41-52?
3. Describe practical ways children and older young people can honour their parents.
4. What difficulties come by loving your parents or loving your child more than loving Jesus?
Consider Matthew 10:34-38.
How can these difficulties be worked out in daily life?
5. What can we learn for life today from how the adult Jesus respected His family members?
Consider Mark 3:20-21; Mark 3:31-35; John 19:25-27.
6. Share ways God may want to use Christian households today.
What kind of Christian activities can be done in a home?
What kind of people should lead and host these activities?
7. Take one of the examples of younger people who chose to follow God and explain why this example is an inspiration and a challenge to you.

¹ Mary was Jesus' mother, while Joseph was (wrongly) assumed to be Jesus' father.