Start the Most Important Conversations You’ll Ever Have

You already know that the best way to leave a God-honoring legacy to your family is to nurture your child’s faith, but you may not feel like you have all the tools you need to tackle this awesome task. That’s okay. Jim Burns, founder of HomeWord and father to three daughters, is here to help… to help you start talking! Jim has found, in his ministry and in his family, that the most effective learning seldom comes from preaching or lecture but from healthy, meaningful dialog. Faith Conversations for Families makes it easy for you to invite God into your family’s time together and talk with your preteens and teenagers about life, faith and following Jesus.

Faith Conversations for Families includes 52 topics with more than 150 easy-to-follow dialog outlines that offer a practical, biblical basis for your family’s spiritual life. Each outline is designed to help you grow together and strengthen each family member’s relationship with God. Suggested activities and exercises make spiritual formation adaptable for kids with varying learning styles, and every dialog is flexible so that you can pick and choose, according to your child’s age and stage, what topics to cover. You’ll also find helpful tips for making regular family time meaningful and fun for everyone. Start building your family’s legacy now by starting conversations that will shape your kids for life and eternity!
JIM BURNS, Ph.D., is president of HomeWord, executive director for the HomeWord Center for Youth and Family at Azusa Pacific University, and host of HomeWord’s radio broadcasts. Jim speaks to thousands of people around the world every year. He is a three-time Gold Medallion Award winning author and has written books for parents, students, children, youth ministry and church leaders. Jim has more than 1.5 million resources in print in more than 20 languages. His most recent resources include The Purity Code, Teaching Your Children Healthy Sexuality, Accept Nothing Less, God Made Your Body, How God Makes Babies, Confident Parenting, Creating an Intimate Marriage, Closer: Devotions to Draw Couples Together, The 10 Building Blocks for a Solid Family, Uncommon Youth Ministry and the Uncommon youth group studies. Jim and his wife, Cathy, and their daughters, Christy, Rebecca and Heidi, live in Southern California.

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JIM BURNS

faith conversations for families

Regal
From Gospel Light
Ventura, California, U.S.A.
To Helen and Lee Lovaas

It’s pretty amazing to watch faithful people use their resources to make a difference in the world. HomeWord is so fortunate to have been touched by your kindness and generosity.

You have made a difference!
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PREFACE

Take the Faith Conversations Challenge

The Faith Conversations Challenge is a 52-week experience designed to enhance your family’s spiritual growth and form a positive habit of energizing your family’s spiritual life for the better. Studies tell us that 80 percent of kids leave the church after high school. However, the chances that they will stay in the church are improved greatly if there are healthy family-time faith conversations in the home.

This book contains ready-to-go spiritual conversation starters for you and your preteen and teenage kids. It has been created to inspire and prompt rich dialog that is relational and spiritually meaningful. The best and most effective learning is seldom from lectures or preaching but from good, healthy sharing and dialog. Each of the 52 chapters offers a practical, biblical basis for your family’s spiritual life that will help you grow together and strengthen each person’s relationship with God, no matter his or her age. There are levels of spiritual learning that take place at different ages, and we’ve done our best to make these conversations adaptable for families with children ages 10 and older.

We have divided each chapter into three parts: “Focus,” “In the Word” and “Reflect and Apply.” The “Focus” is a story or anecdote that draws on the theme of the chapter. “In the Word” is a simple relational Bible study with a practical twist. The “Reflect and Apply” section gives your family a chance to dialog about how the lesson applies to your daily lives.

We have placed more materials in this book than you will probably need; please feel free to adapt this resource to fit your time frame and family needs. The goal is to enjoy conversations about spirituality, to learn together as a family and to develop the habit of a special family time.
The Faith Conversation Challenge is to spend time together as a family 20 minutes a week for 52 weeks—and to make it fun! If you miss a week, don’t worry. Just start again the next week. It’s the process that counts. You will see the rewards in your family’s life for years to come.

Note
INTRODUCTION

Family-Time Faith-Focused Conversations

There is an extremely exciting and growing movement among people of faith: to bring faith-focused conversations back into the home. As researchers began to bring bad news to Christian families that kids were leaving the church in their late teens and early 20s, another bit of research appeared at the same time that was very good news: Families where healthy faith-focused conversations took place on a regular basis saw their children remain strong in their faith and involved in their relationship with God.

One of the most common questions we are asked at HomeWord is, “How do I build a spiritual legacy of faith with my family?” Life is complicated, but the answer to that question is not. In homes where there is an intentional family time dedicated to growing together spiritually, kids thrive. It’s good for communication, good for everyone’s faith and even good for a marriage.

Family-time faith-focused conversations help families grow spiritually together. Spending time together provides an easy avenue for dialog about important subjects many parents want to talk about but feel ill equipped to discuss with their kids. And when conversation topics are intentional, relevant and relational, there is a natural opportunity for families to pray together as well as study God’s Word. This book is designed to get your faith-focused conversations up and running so that you can build in a habit of God-centered family time.

A word to church leaders: More and more faith communities are offering people in their congregation resources like this in order to develop a church-wide family faith conversation at home. Our hope is that you will see this material as one ingredient in your efforts to help the families in your church build a legacy of spiritual growth in their homes.
The Biblical Mandate of the *Shema*

Do you know what the most often quoted Scripture of all time is? Many Christians might answer John 3:16 or maybe Psalm 23, but the most often quoted Scripture from the Bible is by far Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Here’s why: Every morning and every evening in Orthodox Jewish homes, this Scripture is said aloud. It is recited every Sabbath. It is quoted at deathbeds and at bar mitzvahs. When Jesus was asked to name the most important commandment, He went directly to Deuteronomy. “You will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (v. 5). These verses, called the *Shema*, were likely the first Scripture Jesus ever heard as a child because it was probably said every day in His home.

*Shema* is a Hebrew word that means “to listen.” The verses in the *Shema* are a mandate for Christians to leave a legacy of faith to our children:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

These verses teach us three foundational lessons:

1. Loyalty to God
2. Transmission of faith and love to our children
3. Constant mindfulness of God’s teachings

Unfortunately we have lost the *Shema* vision in too many of our homes. It’s time to regain that vision and the focus it takes to build a spiritual legacy in our families. The *Shema* shows us that faith is passed on when parents live out an authentic, faithful life to God, leading their kids by example. Transmitting faith to growing children is not
the job of the church; rather, the church’s role is to come alongside families to help them develop strong faith and values that will guide their children to grow up faithfully and then pass their faith along to the next generation.

It is the calling of parents to disciple children toward spiritual maturity. No one has ever said this is an easy task, and it can definitely get messy. Nonetheless, we are called to develop spiritual growth in the lives of our children—and, as the Shema tells us, one important way we can do so is to talk with our kids about life with God: “when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” . . . in other words, a lot!

If you haven’t yet developed a Shema-shaped family, that’s okay. This book is designed to help. The content you’ll find here has been used in my family and in the families of countless people who would say their family faith conversations are seldom perfect, sometimes powerful, but always worth doing.

How to Use This Book

We often say when working with teens and preteens, K.I.S.S.—Keep It Short and Simple. Think about your kids’ ages and temperaments, and choose family-time activities that they will look forward to and enjoy. I love this Scripture from 1 Thessalonians 2:8:

We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.

We are instructed by the Shema to give our kids the Good News and teaching of God, but also to share our lives together. Create a warm environment and keep away from preaching, lectures and shame. Those tactics didn’t work when you were growing up and they don’t work now! Also remember that kids support what they help to create, so keep your teens and preteens engaged by allowing them to plan and even lead family activities.

In the past, too many families made their family devotions time intensely serious and in the process lost the joy of working on their
spiritual journey together. My suggestion is to keep the conversations moving and connect family times with food or some kind of a fun event. One family I know always makes a run to the local ice cream parlor after their family times. Another family has a ping-pong or Wii tournament after they meet for 20 minutes. The idea is to make family time a meaningful experience, and nobody said it has to be boring or long. Your job is to enhance spiritual growth and help produce family togetherness.

Take a few quiet minutes on your own or with your spouse before your scheduled family time to look over each week’s material. As you prayerfully think about your children, select the portions of dialog and Bible study that you believe will have the most meaning for your family. Then start the conversation! Remember, too, that good conversation sometimes heads in unexpected directions, especially when kids are involved. Don’t be afraid of tangents and rabbit trails, particularly if your children are younger. The point is to invite God into your family’s special time together, and to develop a habit of discussing important spiritual matters in a warm, non-threatening atmosphere.

May God richly bless your family as you share together the Words of Life!
Prayer:  Communication with God

Key Verse

In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.

PSALM 5:3

The Big Idea

Communication with God is what prayer is all about. A consistent prayer life leads to a deeper, more intimate relationship with God.

Focus

Read the following story aloud, and then use the questions to start a faith conversation.

As far as Regina Hammond is concerned, luck has little to do with it. The 37-year-old flight attendant won $100,000 in a Colorado lottery game on top of $50,000 she won the previous year the same way. And she’s not finished yet. Her goal is the $1 million grand prize. Hammond believes that prayer has paved her way to riches. “I pray to God to help me and He answers,” she says.¹

1. How does Regina Hammond’s claim make you feel?
2. If prayer works, why don’t all lottery players pray and win?
3. Do you think Hammond will win the million dollars? Why or why not?
4. Should people pray to get rich? To win sports events? To be successful? Why or why not?
5. Some people believe that lotteries are sinful. If that's true, why would God answer Hammond's prayers to win?

6. Would you pray to win a lottery? Why or why not?

7. Read each of the following items aloud. Which of these is okay to pray for? Why?
   - An A on a test
   - Lots of money
   - Getting a job
   - A better complexion
   - Winning a game
   - New clothes
   - Not getting caught disobeying Mom or Dad
   - Getting a date
   - Losing or gaining weight

In the Word

Now discuss the following questions and get into the Word together:

1. How is prayer different from a face-to-face conversation?
2. Name three ways prayer can bring you closer to God.
3. How can prayer be a dialogue with God rather than a monologue?
4. Read each of the following verses aloud: Psalm 9:1-2; Matthew 7:7; Mark 9:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:18 and 1 John 1:9. What element of prayer do you find in each verse?
5. Have each person in the family demonstrate one of the elements of prayer by:
   - Writing a definition of your element of prayer
   - Explaining why your element of prayer is important
   - Praying a prayer that reflects your particular element

6. Are all these elements of prayer necessary for a well-rounded life of prayer? Why or why not?
Reflect and Apply

1. The following is a list of potential prayer blockers. Read the list aloud, and then let each family member identify the items that cause the most problems for him or her in his or her prayer life.

   - Bad attitude
   - Not making prayer a priority
   - Falling asleep while praying
   - Hectic schedule
   - Don’t feel God’s presence
   - Guilt
   - Lack of faith that God is listening
   - Doubting His existence
   - Selfishness
   - Frustration in prayer
   - Daydreaming

2. Once each family member has identified one or more prayer blockers that most affect him or her, brainstorm together how he or she can overcome that problem. (Example: Hectic schedule—Pray every morning at 7:00 A.M., talk less on the phone.)

3. Now ask each person to identify which of the five elements he or she wants to put special emphasis on in his or her prayer life. Why?

4. Prayer is best learned by practice. As a family, take a few moments to pray together. Try to incorporate all of the five elements of prayer.

Note

The Prayer of Relinquishment

Key Verse

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:20

The Big Idea

The prayer of relinquishment is a prayer of absolute surrender of your will to God’s will. The result is freedom and spiritual growth.

Focus

Read the following story aloud, and then use the questions to start a faith conversation.

Far too often Christians act like the person in this story: “I would like to buy $3.00 worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. . . . I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy $3 worth of God, please.”

1. What do you think of this story?
2. What do you think is the difference between wanting only a little bit of God and wanting to live completely for God?
3. List three areas of your life in which you need to be more surrendered to God.
In the Word

Now discuss the following questions and get into the Word together:

1. The following is an inductive Bible study on one of the great secrets of the faith. With an “inductive study,” you approach the Bible like a journalist, asking “who?” “what?” “where?” “when?” and “why?” Read Matthew 26:36-46 together.

   • **Who?** What persons are involved in this Scripture? Who wrote it?
   • **What?** What is taking place? How many times did Christ ask God to remove the cup? What was the “cup”? What is the prayer of relinquishment?
   • **Where?** Where is it happening?
   • **When?** When does this event take place during the life of Jesus on earth?
   • **Why?** Why does Jesus pray the prayer of relinquishment? Are there consequences to this prayer? What are they?
   • **Well?** How does this prayer apply to your life?

2. Jesus said, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Richard Foster calls the prayer of relinquishment a prayer of self-emptying, surrender, abandonment, release and reservation. How do these words make sense in this episode of Jesus’ life?

3. How can you apply these words to your own life?

4. What would be the results of a life of relinquishment?

5. Relinquishment is no easy task. Even Jesus struggled. It took three times to pray the same prayer, and He even had a bloody sweat lasting long into the night. If you struggle with releasing your will to the Lord, then you are in good company. Read the following Scriptures together and discuss:
• Genesis 22:1-19: Abraham had to release his son Isaac.
• Exodus 7:1-6: Moses had to release his will for the sake of Israel and Egypt.
• 2 Samuel 12:16-22: David had to release his will for the son given by Bathsheba.
• 2 Corinthians 12:7-10: Paul had to release his desire to be free of his “thorn in the flesh.”

Reflect and Apply

Perhaps Andrew Murray put it best: “The starting point and the goal of our Christian life is obedience.” If there is a secret to living the Christian life, it is found through obedience. Through our obedient life come freedom and fulfillment.

1. Read John 14:21. If we say we love God, what will be the result according to this verse?
2. Why is this such an important principle in our Christian lives?
3. How does Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me,” fit into the theme of a prayer of relinquishment?
4. Read Philippians 2:5-11. What attitude did Jesus have according to this Scripture? What was the result?
5. What can we do as a family to help one another live more obedient Christian lives?

Notes
Does God Answer Prayer?

Key Verse
But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
MATTHEW 6:6

The Big Idea
God always answers prayer in one of three ways: no, go or grow.

Focus
Read the following story aloud, and then use the questions to start a faith conversation.

A 17-year-old girl died after a “faith healer” prayed for her healing and her parents pulled the plug on her life support machines. Against the wishes of the medical staff in the hospital, the parents of 17-year-old Debra Barker stopped her hospital respirator because they believed she was healed. Debra had been in a coma for three days after a tragic accident in which she was thrown from her car. Evidence showed the passengers of the car had been drinking.

Debra’s pastor, Stephen Johnson, said that her parents asked Reverend Jesse Thomas, a faith healer who had just preached at their church, to come to the hospital to pray for their daughter. Reverend Thomas, Pastor Johnson and Debra’s parents entered the hospital room at approximately 1:00 in the afternoon. After Reverend Thomas prayed for Debra, he said she was healed—he felt warmth flow through his
hands onto her forehead. Debra’s parents, “in faith,” pulled
the plug to the respirator without the permission of the hos-
pital staff. Debra died 12 minutes later.

1. Was Reverend Thomas an evil man? Why or why not?
2. Did Debra’s parents make a mistake?
3. Where does faith come into the healing process? Since the prayers
were sincere, why didn’t God heal Debra?
4. What lessons can we learn from this “news story”?

In the Word

When we ask God for something, He always answers our prayers. Some-
times we think the only time He answers prayer is when He says yes, but
that is an improper view of prayer. Sometimes He says, “go.” He says yes
to our request and answers our prayer in the affirmative. Sometimes He
says, “no.” We ask in faith, but He knows best and it may be that what we
asked for is not best for us. Other times God says, “grow.” It might be a
matter of timing and He wants us to wait on His will. With this in mind,
discuss the following questions and get into the Word as a family:

1. When has God answered a prayer of yours with “go”? With “no”? With “grow”?
2. Read the following verses together and decide which of the three an-
swers to prayer applies to the passage: Genesis 15:2-5, Luke 22:42,
3. Read James 4:2-3. What does James 4:2 say to us today?
4. Read Matthew 6:5-8. What point(s) is Jesus making? What is the sig-
nificance of this passage to your prayer life?
5. What makes an answer of “No” or “Grow” to our prayer so difficult
to handle?
6. Why is “No” often a very good answer to prayer?
7. Where have you seen God’s love and care in your life when He gave you an answer you weren’t looking for?

Reflect and Apply

1. How do you feel knowing that God always answers prayer? Are you more or less likely to pray?

2. Below are statements about prayer. Read each statement aloud, and then have each family member indicate the degree to which he or she agrees with the statement (for example, “I strongly agree,” “I strongly disagree,” “I have no real opinion”). Remember that there are no right or wrong answers! Let each person self-evaluate without judgment from others.

   • I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that God answers prayer.
   • I believe there is a God, but I question whether He is personally interested in everything I do.
   • I don’t always know how God answers prayer, but I always have faith that He will.
   • When I don’t see an obvious answer to my prayer, I begin to wonder if God answers at all.
   • I often thank God as well as ask for things.
   • I tend to treat God like Santa Claus—give me this; give me that.
   • When God says no, I feel it is for my own good.
   • When God says, “wait awhile,” I can accept His timing without reservation.
   • When God answers my prayer, my faith is strengthened.
   • I often think my prayers being answered is just a coincidence.
   • I find myself praying throughout the day.
   • When I don’t feel like praying is when I pray the hardest.
   • I don’t pray in public.
   • I feel my prayer life is really growing.

3. Now take a few minutes to pray for each other. Specifically, ask God to grow each person’s trust in Him.