



raising prayerful kids

Fun & Easy
Activities for
Building Lifelong
Habits of Prayer



stephanie thurling & sarah holmstrom

Praise for *Raising Prayerful Kids*

First of all, I wish I had this book when my boys were little. In *Raising Prayerful Kids*, Stephanie and Sarah gently guide parents to help kids know God through prayer. Whether it's through fun games or ancient prayer practices, you will find a variety of ways to pray with your kids. Prayer is our first line of defense as parents. All other parenting formulas fall short of simply calling out to our capable, transcendent, and holy God.

HEATHER MACFADYEN, host of the *Don't Mom Alone* podcast and author of *Don't Mom Alone*

What a blessing *Raising Prayerful Kids* is for the whole family! Sharing honestly from their journeys of motherhood and faith, Stephanie and Sarah will minister grace to you as a parent. And your children will benefit from the activities by learning to turn to and experience God in the daily moments. Don't miss out on these engaging, specific, and practical ways to grow your children up in God!

KELLY MAXWELL HAER, PhD, LMFT, executive director of Boone Center for the Family, Pepperdine University

Authors Stephanie Thurling and Sarah Holmstrom have written a book I wish I'd had when my girls were little. *Raising Prayerful Kids* is truly a must-have on every parent's nightstand. Thurling and Holmstrom have written a powerful, easy-to-use book that will help parents lead their children into an intimate relationship with God. The authors, who are busy moms themselves, know parents are already overwhelmed with crazy schedules, so they aren't trying to add "one more thing they SHOULD be doing"—rather, these authors help parents make what they're already doing into a more

intentional activity that will teach children to pray creatively and actively. From simple prayer games to focused prayers to contemplative prayers, there's something here for every age and stage of a child's faith journey. As a Gigi, I'll also be getting a copy of this amazing book so I can encourage my five grandkids to practice His presence throughout every single day.

MICHELLE MEDLOCK ADAMS, award-winning, bestselling author of more than 100 books, including *They Call Me Mom* and *Dinosaur Devotions*

Parents teach children to ride a bike, hit a ball, tie a shoelace, and write their name, but many have never thought about teaching a child to pray. Now there is a book to help! My wife and I have tried to create a prayer-filled home, but this book has reignited my resolve to pray with my children. In *Raising Prayerful Kids*, Stephanie and Sarah offer valuable guidance and helpful ideas that every parent can benefit from. This book is a treasure trove of practical and purposeful ways you can teach your children to pray. Pick up a copy today. You will benefit from this book.

JOSH MULVIHILL, PhD, author of *50 Things Every Child Needs to Know before Leaving Home: Raising Children to Godly Adults*, GospelShapedFamily.com

We are trying to teach our children the importance of connection with the Father each day. This book is our new guide! We long for them to understand that God made them for the unique assignment he has for them. This book will be a resource as they come to understand that reality.

KATHERINE AND JAY WOLF, authors of *Suffer Strong* and *Hope Heals*

This book gives all kinds of practical examples of how two moms creatively, joyfully, and passionately built prayer into the fabric of their homes, and by doing it, built rich relationships with their littles. In their stories, you'll clearly see how the "joy of the Lord"

can be an everyday, any-circumstance sort of experience for kids of all ages.

JIM AND LYNNE JACKSON, authors of *Discipline That Connects with Your Child's Heart* and cofounders of Connected Families

Raising Prayerful Kids is the perfect combination of encouragement and equipping that modern moms and dads desperately need in praying *for* and *with* their kids. It reads like a humorous letter from a dear friend combined with practical-yet-delightful ideas for engaging kids in the life-giving act of prayer.

CHRISTIE THOMAS, author of *Fruit Full: 100 Family Experiences for Growing in the Fruit of the Spirit*

This book is like an encyclopedia for family prayer, full of Scripture and practical activities. It is easy to read, which is a blessing for tired moms like me! It is obvious that Steph and Sarah poured their hearts into this book, and I know that many families will be blessed by their words. I cannot wait to use it with my kids!

SARAH KEELING, author of *Psalm Prayers for Kids*

When we pray as a family, my wife and I want our kids to engage with God in a conversation. We encourage them to pray about anything and everything. Whether you've already started a practice of prayer with your kids or are looking for some ideas on how, this book will guide you along that journey. Powerful and practical, the ideas in this book will move your family into a deeper relationship with God!

BROCK EASTMAN, author of *Faith and Science with Dr. Fizzlebop*, *Bedtime on Noah's Ark*, and the Quest for Truth series

Raising Prayerful Kids is a wonderful mix of practical handbook, historic faith and practice, devotional guide, and talking to your favorite mom friend. It's full of Scripture and grace, and if you're a parent seeking to raise your children to know and love the Lord, this is a book you *definitely* want to add to your tool kit!

DANIELLE HITCHEN, author of the Baby Believer series and founder of Catechesis Books

I truly believe God has inspired these two women to write this book for such a time as this. Raising children to pray and love God genuinely and intimately like this will change everything—a child, a family, an entire generation. The rich truths in these pages are written in a way that's practical, joyful, funny, real, challenging, and creative. Sarah and Steph are helping parents everywhere to simply and beautifully live out God's directives to us in Deuteronomy 6, and I believe God will use this book to call a generation into a closer walk with Him. As a mother of grown children, I couldn't help but wish I had this book in my hands and heart as a young mom, yet I was moved in my own prayer life and current relationships. This book will be the first baby gift I give to every new parent! Thank you, Sarah and Steph, for living out these truths and sharing them with the world.

JANA ALAYRA, Christian songwriter and worship leader for children and mother of four

When my kids were younger, my husband and I developed a list of five family values we live by. One of those values is to “share the gospel in our home.” This means sharing the Good News with those who visit our home as well as talking about Jesus often as a family together. *Raising Prayerful Kids* has equipped us to take this value to a new level and make faith conversations normal and consistent in our home. This book is not only about prayer. In a

refreshingly practical way, it equips us as parents to raise our kids with a wholesome faith that permeates every area of their lives. *Raising Prayerful Kids* leads us in making prayer not only a focus but a lifestyle.

ERYN LYNUM, speaker, author of *936 Pennies: Discovering the Joy of Intentional Parenting*, Master Naturalist sharing the creation story

As parents, we know prayer is vital to maintaining and cultivating our connection with God. And we want very much to help our children see prayer in the same way. But how do we begin to teach them all that prayer entails? How do we show them what prayer is, how to enjoy praying, and how to pray even when we don't feel like doing it? In *Raising Prayerful Kids*, Stephanie and Sarah cover all that and more. Whether you are new to praying with kids or a seasoned veteran, you will find new ways to approach praying with kids that will light up their prayer life and your own! This book reminds us of what is most important and shows us how to get there. I know families will be changed for good by the ideas in *Raising Prayerful Kids*.

GRETA ESKRIDGE, author of *Adventuring Together: How to Create Connections and Make Lasting Memories with Your Kids* and *100 Days of Adventure: Nature Activities, Creative Projects, and Field Trips for Every Season*

As a marriage and family therapist, I am constantly reminded about the fact that we need more than information to grow. We need to practice the truth and interact with it. As a mom of three young children, I am always grateful for resources that invite my kids and me to actively engage with the truth we find in Scripture and to deepen our family's relationship with God through the gift of prayer. *Raising Prayerful Kids* is that resource. As I read this book, I felt inspired and equipped with practical steps to encourage

my kids in the delightful adventure of a relationship with Jesus.
This is a book to return to again and again!

NICOLE ZASOWSKI, marriage and family therapist and author of *From Lost to Found* and *What If It's Wonderful?*

Raising Prayerful Kids is possibly the most practical and helpful book I have ever encountered! What could be more important than teaching our kids and grandkids how to place prayer at the center of their lives? And I found that by reading this book, it challenged me to place prayer at the center of my own life! This is must reading for anyone who wants to equip the children in their lives to face life joyfully and victoriously!

GLENN GUNDERSON, senior pastor, Purpose Church, Pomona, California;
author of *Biblical Antidotes to Life's Toxins* and *Fourth Quarter Fumbles*



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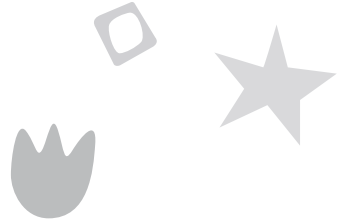
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CHAPTER 1

Raising Prayerful Kids

Steph and Sarah



Sarah's Story

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I had a parenting incident that terrified me, embarrassed me, and shook me to the core. I vowed to never tell anyone about it. But here we go.

It was just a normal, chaotic Sunday afternoon like any other. My husband, Eric, is one of the pastors at our church. On this particular day, he needed to stay after the service for a meeting, so I headed home with our four kids.

Life with four kids ages six and under includes a lot of emotions and experiences, and this afternoon was no exception. Our day involved some loud sibling rivalry, a messy lunch, and a few time-outs. There were also some snuggles while reading on the couch and

tickle fights that produced the sweetest little giggles. Those giggles that you want to bottle up so you can listen to them later. All in all, things were going smoothly.

Levi, the baby, was lying on his floor mat, and his four-year-old sister, Brinley, was lying right beside him. The six-year-old, Charlie, and the two-year-old, Lila, were happily playing together until Lila accidentally peed her pants . . . again. I was taking off her soaking-wet clothes when all of a sudden I heard every parent's worst nightmare sound: loud choking coming from my little three-month-old baby. I went to scoop him up and saw something shiny in his mouth. It turned out that Brinley had put her play ring on his finger to pretend that they were married, and then Levi had put his finger in his mouth and was starting to choke on the ring. He went from choking, to gurgling, to making no sound at all, and he was bright red. I absolutely panicked.

My mind went blank. I forgot to turn him over and pat him on the back. Instead, I scooped him up and frantically called 911. A few moments into my phone call, Levi coughed up the ring and all the color came back to his face.

While I was on the phone, sobbing, my three oldest children responded in the following ways:

I heard Charlie wailing over and over again in the background, "God, please don't let Levi die. Take me instead!" His prayer was so loud that I had to go out to the front yard with Levi and my cell phone so that I could hear the 911 dispatcher.

Lila was still half-naked from her accident, but she had grabbed a Sharpie and colored black permanent marker across her lips.

Brinley took off her shirt because, well, I guess that's just what you do in a crisis.

Three paramedics and two firemen showed up at our house only a few minutes later. The first thing the fireman asked when he arrived was not "Is your baby okay?" Clearly Levi was fine. He took one

look at the crying mom, the panicky six-year-old, the tiny new baby whose mom had somehow allowed him to choke on a ring, the shirtless four-year-old, and the half-naked toddler with Sharpie across her lips.

Then he glanced around, looked back at me, and asked in a horrified voice, “Are all these kids *yours*?” I somewhat reluctantly replied, “Yes . . . yes, they are.”

After the team assessed Levi, that same fireman spoke again and assured me, “You did the right thing. Calling 911 can be really scary.”

Charlie then piped up, “Oh, this isn’t her first time calling you guys. She called 911 when she locked me in the car.”

He was referring to a few years earlier when I had accidentally locked the keys in the car while he was still in it. I had to call 911, and a fireman had to break Charlie’s window to get our car unlocked. I was absolutely mortified, but rather than explaining the situation, I just hoped Jesus would come back at that very moment in time and suck me up to Heaven.

I had to start with this story because I couldn’t think of a better way to illustrate how intense parenthood is and how much we need Jesus. Parenthood is emotional, overwhelming, embarrassing, beautiful, messy, and even terrifying at times. I never knew how much I really, truly needed Jesus until I became a mom. I need him every single hour of every single day, and I hope and pray that my kids grow to feel the same way.

Eric and I are in a life group with eight other couples who have become some of our closest friends. We meet every other Monday night to study the Bible and pray for each other and each other’s kids. Once we were doing a parenting study and were talking about our biggest dreams for our kids. I asked the question, “What do you most want for your kids?”

We all shared some dreams.

“I want them to go to college.”

“I hope she’ll always be confident.”

“I want him to never do drugs.”

But as we brainstormed, we realized there was only one consistent hope and only one thing that truly mattered to us. We all shared something along the lines of “*I want my son/daughter to always know and love Jesus.*” That really stuck with me.

Of course there are other things we want for our kids—to be protected, successful, and smart—but when it comes down to it, the only thing I *really* care about is that they love Jesus.

If they love Jesus, they’ll love others, they’ll have the peace that passes all understanding, they’ll have joy in their hearts, and they’ll walk around with confidence knowing they’re saved. That’s partially why we wrote *Raising Prayerful Kids*. We want to let go of all the stuff we strive for—being the perfect parent and having the perfect child—and we want to zero in on what matters the most: making sure our kids know Jesus.

Steph’s Story

“Mama, are you nice or mean?”

The question made me pause. My three-year-old daughter, Harriette, looked at me with her big blue eyes and wild blonde hair. I had just spent the last hour barking orders at my kids.

“Sit down. Pick up your toys. Be quiet. Don’t touch your sister. I said be quiet! Why aren’t you listening?! What is wrong with you?!”

I had a cold, my husband was at graduate school studying late after he had just returned from a business trip for a company we knew he would soon be laid off from, and it was the end of a really stressful, bad month. My energy was depleted and my patience was nonexistent. I was so caught up in my own stress that I forgot that my kids didn’t cause any of it. Except maybe the cold—there is a good possibility one of them gave me the cold.

I looked at Harriette and went over to wrap her in a big hug while I said a silent prayer: *Lord, help me to find peace in you so I can be peace for my family. Help me view them as a gift and not an added problem.* She smiled at me, and the barking of orders ceased, dinner was made joyfully, and those twilight hours before bedtime became pleasant and peaceful.

You see, Jesus has the power to transform families. The further I walk into my parenting journey, the more aware I am of my deep need for Jesus. I can't parent out of my own strength—I just don't have it in me. But when I rely on Jesus and turn to him in prayer, my parenting changes: I am softer, yet stronger. Quieter, but heard. There is freedom in knowing that I am not parenting alone, because the Creator of the universe is ready and willing to help. He longs to help us raise and guide our kids. In those hard moments, when our bodies are feeling tired and our souls are feeling weary, Jesus wants us to go to him with that.

One Sunday after church, one of my dear friends, Angela, confided in me that she was not sure how to add prayer and faith into her family's life. "I don't know what to do with Charlotte. She keeps asking me to pray with her, but I don't know how," she said.

Angela was a newer believer, and her kindergarten-age daughter was starting to ask her questions about God. She was curious about the stories she was learning in Sunday school, and she asked Angela to pray with her at night. Angela, who is a perfectionist at heart, felt confused and overwhelmed. Like she didn't have the right tools to properly shepherd her daughter through these questions. My heart broke for her, as I knew she felt so much pressure to "get it right."

While I don't think I gave her a very good answer just then, and I probably wasn't much support in the moment, that conversation did lead to the inspiration for this book.

I realized that there are so many of us, like Angela, who don't know how to pray with our kids or are not comfortable praying out

loud. Maybe you have never gone to church before or are just starting to go to church again after having children. Whether it's because you feel like you should, because you want to teach your kids good morals, or because God opened your heart through the miracle of becoming a parent, it is not uncommon to start going to church again after you have a child. Maybe you wonder how to talk about God with your kids. This book is for you.

Or maybe you have been going to church your entire life. You never let go of your faith, and it was a natural transition for you to bring your kids to church and to pray with them. You are already praying, but you want to take it a step further to add more depth, creativity, intention, and closeness with your kids. This book is for you, too.

Everyone is on a faith journey, and we are all at different points in our relationship with God. It doesn't matter where we are, though . . . we all get to work together to grow the Kingdom of God. This is such great news! God calls us to start where we are right now. He doesn't call us to figure it out, get it right, and then follow him; he calls us to follow him and then grow with his help.

Our mission and our desire for this book is that no matter where you are in your faith journey, you will feel equipped with the tools to be praying more often with your kids and to make God the center of your family. We hope to help you surround your kids with a living faith and with meaningful prayer. We want to make it easier for you to walk alongside your children in the pursuit of spiritual development.

Why Prayer Matters

Rest assured, we aren't about doing more—parents already do enough. Instead, we're passionate about making what you're already doing more intentional. Parenting is the most overwhelming job in

all the world. Daily, we are making tough choices about food, faith, extracurricular activities, discipline, schedules, school, sleepovers. The list is endless. To be a mom or a dad is to make decisions every single day that will impact another person. This can end up feeling like extreme pressure not to ruin our child's life. Oftentimes, we stay stuck in shame and fear about our parenting, or we go to the other extreme and pretend we are doing it all perfectly. Yet another unhealthy way we deal with the pressure of parenthood is to laugh about our imperfections and shrug off the significance of our role—we joke about hiding from our kids in the closet, eating ice cream or drinking wine while they fight in the living room.

We know these extremes because we've been there too. But we believe there is another way. We believe that we weren't actually made to parent out of our own strength. We believe that we share the weight of parenthood with the Creator of the universe and that he longs to help us every minute of every day.

We aren't supposed to do this alone.

Today we are bombarded by parenting podcasts, parenting books, and perhaps loudest of all, messages from other parents on social media. Both of us have spent years going to Google, Instagram, our moms' group, or our pastors first. Hear us when we say that these things are invaluable and have played major roles in our parenting journeys, and probably yours, too. But Jesus wants us to run to him first, in all situations. He knows each of our kids so deeply. He made them all! He knows what they need in every moment. He speaks to us by guiding us or giving us the words to say or the actions to take. He has answers for us in his Word. In fact, the Bible makes it pretty clear how we are to parent.

Deuteronomy 6:5-9 says,

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 on 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.

Our faith is meant to surround us. We can be talking about our faith all the time with our kids . . . when we walk along the road or drive in the car, when we wake up and when we go to bed. God calls us to teach our children our faith, to instill in them his love and his law.

In the Jewish faith, the verses quoted above are part of the Shema. The Shema consists of three passages from the Jewish Torah: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Deuteronomy 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41. It serves as a prayer, and in Jewish homes, it is written on a scroll, which is then rolled up and placed in a small box called a mezuzah. Mezuzahs are fastened to the insides of doorframes—sometimes every doorframe of the home and other times just the front door. It is a way to take seriously the text's instructions to write these commandments on your doorframes.

I (Steph) went to Israel with my husband and son when he was thirteen months old. Taking a little toddler halfway across the world to the Holy Land was the adventure of a lifetime. I made it a priority to pick out a beautiful mezuzah to bring home and put on our doorframe. When we moved a few years later, I made sure to pry our mezuzah off and bring it to our new home. I love this tradition and the symbolism of hanging God's Word at the very entrance to your home. To me, it's a reminder of where I need to place my family's focus—on God.

You might be thinking to yourself, *That sounds exhausting! Talk about my faith all the time? Pray all day?* But again, we are not meant

to do it alone. The Creator of the universe is on our side, and it is our calling and privilege as parents, grandparents, and mentors to keep training our kids in the right way to go.

Proverbs 22:6 (NKJV) says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”

Now is the time to be teaching your children to pray. Your kids are listening and watching. Start today. It doesn’t matter how old they are; it’s never too early or too late to start being more intentional with their faith development. From now on, choose to make prayer for your kids and with your kids a nonnegotiable part of your day.

The behaviors you model at home while your kids are young will have a lasting impact on how they view and practice faith as young people and as adults. Research tells us time and time again that it is parents who are the main influence on a child’s lasting faith. According to a report from the National Study of Youth and Religion, 82 percent of kids raised by parents who were active in their faith at church *and* at home continued to practice their faith as young adults.¹ It’s not the church (as important as church is); it’s the home that makes the difference.

A majority of parents know that this is true. In fact, most parents (85 percent) recognize they are responsible for teaching their children about their faith. However, of those parents, a majority do not spend time talking about Jesus or studying the Bible. It’s not that these parents are unmotivated or apathetic, though. Surveys actually show that they mostly feel unequipped.² That’s the reason we started writing this book. We know our job as parents isn’t to be perfect or to learn and teach all the things, but to love Jesus and love our kids. We want to help other parents do the same.

Current research says that prayer is the most common faith practice used among American adults.³ However, people most often choose to pray by themselves. While praying alone is an important practice, families can and should pray together, too. Praying with

your kids is fundamental to teaching spiritual disciplines at home, and it can be a significant influence on their faith journey. We want parents (and grandparents, honorary parents, aunts and uncles, and ministry leaders) to understand that prayer is an important part of the Christian faith. It is accessible, it can be deeply connecting, and it doesn't have to be a ton of work.

The main reason we pray is to talk with and grow closer to Jesus. However, research shows that there are so many other benefits of prayer as well. These benefits include “reduced stress, increased self-awareness, better communication, and a more empathetic and forgiving attitude toward others.”⁴

When it comes to prayer and family, in one study children with parents who pray more than once a day reported better relationships with their parents, even if those prayers were not done together. However, joint prayer can be such a powerful tool and can help couples be more forgiving, as another study showed an increased level of trust between those couples who prayed together.⁵ And aren't we always striving to build more trust between ourselves and our families? These are just some of the many reasons why we are delighted to be sharing the journey ahead with you and your kids. So let's get started!