

“Church Talk”

Avoiding Abstract Words at Easter

By R. Scott Wiley

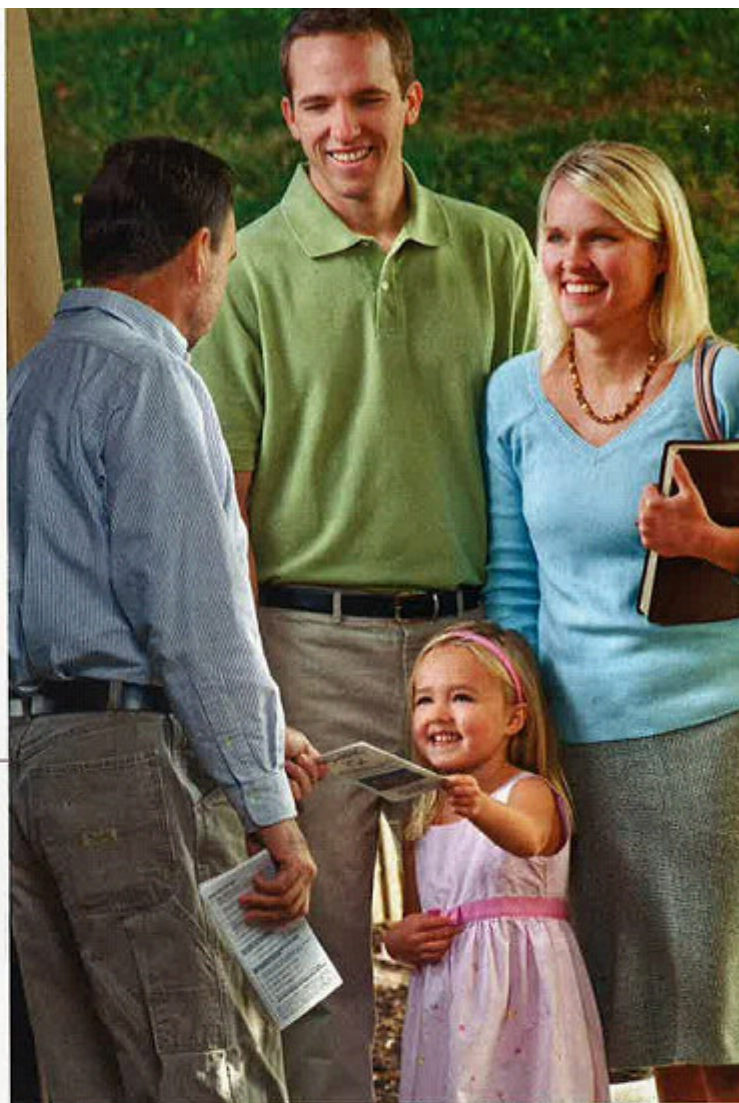
WE CONFUSE preschoolers and young children. Often the words and phrases we adults use have strange meanings for children. They think in very concrete terms and have fewer life experiences. They interpret everything they hear in basic, literal ways. When they hear adults speak, they can misunderstand or become confused. Why? Because adults speak in symbolic, abstract language.

Abstract vs. Literal

Think about everyday speech. “He drives me crazy.” “She blew up the picture.” “I think I could just eat you up.” All these make sense to adults but can be misinterpreted by children. One of my favorite children’s books is *The King Who Rained* by Fred Gwynne (Simon & Schuster, 2006). This book illustrates a child’s literal understanding. The king is illustrated hanging in the sky with torrents of rain falling to the ground. When the child’s mom says she is a little hoarse, the picture of the mother becomes a small horse. Children have difficulty with words that have double meanings, *homonyms* (words that sound the same like *rain* and *reign*), and symbolic phrases.

When we talk about biblical and spiritual issues, we often use symbolic language. At Easter adults use lots of words and phrases that are abstract, symbolic, confusing, or beyond the understanding of young children. Even words that seem concrete may be beyond the experiences

Adults tend to use words and phrases that are confusing for children.



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of young children and need explanation. Think about the following phrases and the pictures they may create in the mind of a concrete thinker.

- Lamb of God
- Lost person
- Saved
- Ask Jesus to live in your heart
- The body and the blood of Christ (in the Lord’s Supper)
- God’s house
- God’s Word

Think of these other words that are used frequently during the Easter season. Would they be meaningful to a young child?

- Crucifixion
- Resurrection
- Sacrifice
- Atonement
- Salvation
- Born again

As you talk with your child, use words and phrases that communicate clearly and simply. Use *church* and *Bible* rather than other phrases. Use Jesus’ name when talking about Him. Other designations (*Christ*, *Messiah*) will become more meaningful to your child as she grows older. If you use another phrase for Jesus (such as *God’s Son*), make sure you equate that phrase with Jesus; use other

names for Jesus sparingly and only with children who are 5 years old or older. Younger preschoolers will still become confused with various names for Jesus.

Talking Easter

Talk about the story of Easter simply. Say: "Jesus died on the cross. His friends placed Him in a cave called a tomb. After three days, God made Jesus alive again. Mary came to the tomb and found that the tomb was empty. Jesus spoke to her. He was alive! Mary ran to tell Jesus' disciples (helpers)." Focus on the fact that Jesus is alive and He loves us rather than the death and sacrifice. Those aspects of Easter will be more meaningful to your child as she grows older.

Making It Clear

Encourage your child to ask questions. If you are unsure what she is asking, say: "Tell me more about what you are thinking" or "What makes you ask that question?" Clarify what she is asking so you can give the best answer. Give a short answer that directly answers your child's question. Avoid giving lots of additional details unless your child asks for more information. She will continue to ask questions as long as she is interested or unsure of what you have told her. Giving shorter answers allows you to give her just what she needs. Too much information can lead to confusion or misunderstandings.

Strong Foundation

Remember that your child is beginning to learn about God and His love, about who Jesus is and the things He did. At Easter (and throughout the year), you can build a strong foundational understanding about Jesus and His love. Avoid "church talk" or "adult talk." As your child grows she will understand more abstract ideas because of that strong foundation.

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WHAT DO I SAY?

Remember, every child grows and develops at his own rate. The level of understanding will vary among children who are the same age. Give simple answers to your child's questions. Allow him to ask for more information if he wants more.

- **Jesus** — Use Jesus' name when talking about Him. Other names or titles such as *Savior, Christ, or Messiah* are difficult for children to understand. If a child hears one of these names, explain that it is another name for Jesus.

- **Crucifixion** — Jesus died on a cross. If a child hears this word, explain that it means the way that Jesus died.

- **Resurrection** — God made Jesus alive again.

- **Tomb** — A place to bury people who have died. In Bible times, it was often a cave with a stone for a door.

- **Disciple** — Someone who learned from Jesus; 12 of Jesus' special helpers/friends

- **Lord's Supper** — Jesus and His disciples/helpers had a special meal. Today in church we have a special meal to think about and remember what Jesus did. People eat bread and drink juice during the Lord's Supper. Avoid talking about the symbolism of the bread and juice until your child is older.

- **Lost** — People who do not know about Jesus; people who have not chosen to obey God

- **Saved** — People who have become Christians; people who have chosen to listen to God and do what He says

SPIRITUAL CONCEPTS

For younger preschoolers, focus on these concepts:

- Jesus loves you.
- Jesus helped people because He loved them.
- Jesus told people about God.
- Jesus wants us to love Him.
- Jesus did things others could not do.