

Newborn Promise Podcast: Episode 17

“Teaching Young Hearts” with Dr. Mary Manz Simon

Audra Haney: Thanks for tuning in to the Newborn Promise podcast, a production of Graham Blanchard Incorporated. You are listening to an interview with Dr. Mary Manz Simon, called "Teaching Young Hearts." For today's show notes, transcript, and more information about our recently released book, "Your Newborn Promise Project," please visit grahamblanchard.com.

Hi, I'm Audra Haney. Thank you so much for joining us today.

I really think that most new parents long to be intentional with their children, especially those that would seek out a podcast on parenting and devote time to it. But it can be hard to know where to begin. How do we intentionally build in spiritual moments into the everyday routines of changing diapers and feeding little bellies. How do convey large spiritual concepts to the little faces covered in applesauce and washable marker streaks? What's the starting date to teach tiny hearts about our big God?

We are thrilled to have Dr. Mary Manz Simon here with us today, as she pours over new moms and dads with her wealth of professional experience, personal wisdom, passion for teaching children, and compassion for moms and dads in the thick of it. Not only does Dr. Mary have her PhD in early childhood education, but she has drawn from her own parenting experience to write a large and widely celebrated collection of Christian children's books, including the "Little Visits with Jesus" collection that has sold over three million copies in English alone.

Today, Dr. Mary will share with us how to be intentional with the short and precious time we have with our children, how to best share spiritual concepts with them, and how reading to your child can be the springboard into a lifetime of seeking God.

Dr. Mary, thank you so much for being here with us today.

Dr. Mary : Well, it's my pleasure.

Audra Haney: Well, Dr. Mary, you're one of the few people in the Christian book and education industries to have a really diverse range of roles. You're an author, you're an advisor, and analyst, a speaker, but you're also a mother, and now a grandmother. Tell us a little bit about that new role as grandmother.

Dr. Mary : Well, it's really fun most of all. We have five grandsons, including one who joined our family all the way from Ethiopia. It's just a wonderful time of life. It's so fresh and new.

Audra Haney: That's so beautiful. Dr. Mary, do you mind telling us a little bit about your faith, and why your faith is important to you in daily life?

Dr. Mary : Sure. I'm the wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter of Lutheran pastors. The church as been, for a long time, the center of life for our family, and that provided a framework as I was growing up and certainly throughout my life. But a relationship with Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, that's something that doesn't really come from a framework. It comes when the Holy Spirit works in us, and that personal connection with God that I have when I'm praying, when I'm exercising at the gym in the morning, that time of talking at any point in the day, anywhere I am, that kind of an emotional connection, of a relationship that is a centering focus of my life. That is just so special.

Audra Haney: Dr. Mary, your books really reflect your faith. How did your work and your faith really come to intersect like that?

Dr. Mary : I really lived my life backwards. I set my goals, and I achieved them by the time I was 32. I had hoped to have two children, we had three. I wanted to get my doctorate, which I did, and I wanted to teach full time at a state university, which I did. When I got to that point, it was, "Okay God, now what do I do?" And it was at that point where I realized I had been doing things backwards. Instead of me deciding what I was supposed to be doing, I really should have looked at things through a different lens.

You know that verse in Jeremiah 29, where God says, "I know the plans I have for you." That verse just took on a new meaning for me when that moment of realization happened. It's God's plans, and even today as I try to use my time and be a good stewardship of that gift of time that He gives me, I'm really trying to pay attention to where He directs me, and I pray a lot of times for discernment. To know what is the best path to take. And you know what's happened? Ever since I started looking through God's lens, or the lens that I think that I'm supposed to looking through from His perspective, He has done such incredible things with my life. I could never have even dreamed of what He has done. It has just been the most amazing life. I tell my kids that, I tell my husband that, all the time, because I just can't even fathom what amazing things He has done. It's certainly not me. I couldn't have even thought it up.

Audra Haney: Dr. Mary, our audience is new and expecting parents. What were some things that helped you through that transition of being a new parent?

Dr. Mary :

Well, the transition to motherhood is always an interesting time, even if you think you've got it down pat. But transitions are hard because they're filled with so many unknowns, and there's so much that's really out of our control. I think that one of the things that helped me when I was going through that time as a first time mom was learning from previous transitions. What did I do that seemed to work, and what should I not do again?

I think what helped was thinking of myself as my own teacher. You know that we say that experience is the best teacher? I disagree with that. Learning from experience is the best teacher. All of us have experiences from which we can learn. I think what happens sometimes is we forget that we can teach ourselves. I still make mistakes like that today. I'll know not to do something, and what do I do? I do it.

Learning what we've done in the past that has worked and what can apply to a new situation, whether you're transitioning as a new mom, whether you're transitioning to seeing a child go off to kindergarten, or even to college. Those aren't just transitions for our children. Those are transitions for us too, and we sometimes forget that. We're so intent on wanting to help a child through a transition, we forget that we need to lean on God for that time, too, because we're going through the transition.

You know, faith is central to life. Everything flows from the core, and there are fun, easy times to be a Christian, when everything's going right, it's great to be a Christian. But after a miscarriage, or when a parent dies, or I think back to a time I got an email from England saying, "Your daughter," who was studying abroad, "is scheduled for immediate surgery." I mean, those are the times you look for something to hang onto. There's your faith. That's what faith is. It's so core. Everything flows from the core, just like the gym teacher says. Strengthen the core, and then everything will flow from that.

Audra Haney:

That is so true, and that actually reminds me of our Graham Blanchard board book, "Your Core," which does an incredible job of explaining that concept to children in a really clever way. Kelly Grant did a great job on that book.

What was some early advice that you were given that really made a difference in your life when you were in the trenches of motherhood? I think you had three children under the ages of three and a half at one point. What was advice that really encouraged you?

Dr. Mary :

We did, we had three children in three and a half years. Those were the years that I was earning my doctorate. That was a five year program, and those were key in there. That was an interesting time for me, too, because I'm an early childhood educator. I was supposed to have all the

answers going into being a mom. So, it was frustrating for me when I realized I didn't know what I was doing. I knew the theory. I had taught it at the college level. I really knew this stuff. I had taught kindergarten and preschool, and I had worked with kids. But I didn't know what I was doing sometimes.

So, that frustration and really accepting the point that I wasn't a perfect mom, and I was never gonna be a perfect mom, no matter how hard I tried. But, when we make mistakes, that's why there's Jesus. Because we come to Him on our knees and beg His forgiveness, and He does.

One thing that I think is really helpful to remember when everything seems to be going wrong, look for what's going right. It starts with catching a child being good, because when we see a child make a good judgment or doing something that's right, that's really affirming to us, too, as moms and dads. So often it's easy to catch a child doing the wrong thing, and we not only do that once or twice, but we do that 10 or 20 times a day. Instead, think of how the tone in a home would change if you catch your child being good. Catching him do the right things when you can affirm your child. That really can bolster your own self-confidence as a parent, and also make you feel good inside that, "Wow, I am doing something right. Thank God for that."

Audra Haney:

That's so true, and I love that. I want to transition a little bit and talk about your children's book. You are the author of the widely-known and celebrated "Little Visits with Jesus" collection, as well as many other Christian children's books. What inspired you to take on this work?

Dr. Mary :

I'm probably one of the few authors you will talk to who never planned to write a book. After writing a doctoral dissertation, I never wanted to write anything else again. But what happened was we didn't have devotional materials to use for our kids, and here we had three under four. We needed action oriented devotions. So, what I did was I wrote down on McDonald's napkins and spelling lists and shopping lists, whatever I happened to have, a napkin from a restaurant, how God was at work in our life that day. We used that as the starting point for our devotion that night.

So, I kept all these scraps of paper in a drawer. One day, pulled them out, contacted an editor, and they said, "Keep writing those scraps of paper." That got on the Christian bestseller list, that was "Little Visits with Jesus." Now three million books, three million copies of my books sold, and that's kind of the story of what happened. It wasn't, again, something I planned. It was something that God intended. All my writing has come from my own needs.

The same thing with the "Hear Me Read" books. Our son Matthew was struggling in first grade. He was having trouble learning to read, and so

every night on our brown sofa in our parsonage, we would sit there and read about Pat and Pan, they were two pink pigs. The stories were so boring. No wonder Matthew didn't want to read. So, one night I said, "Matthew, how about I write you a book about Jesus?" And he said, "David and Goliath is my favorite Bible story." So, I wrote down in 20 minutes the story of David and Goliath. Used 25 words or less, I can't remember, maybe 23? Matthew could read the story of David and Goliath without pictures. He could read that story. And I knew we had a winner.

Now those "Hear Me Read" books have sold more than a million copies and they're in 10 languages. I know that there are a lot of little Matthews out there who are struggling with reading, but who can not only learn to read, but learn to read about Jesus. And it all happened because our little guy was struggling with reading.

I look at one of my recent books, "Faith Footprints." It's a devotional for grandmas because it's been very revealing to me as a grandmother of five boys how some of the situations and feelings and issues I thought I had dealt with, like competition and jealousy, I'm still coping with at my age, as a grandma. And other grandmothers are too. My writing comes out of my own experiences. That's why it's so real.

Audra Haney:

Dr. Mary, you make it look so easy relating these spiritual truths to children. But what do you find are the greatest challenges in that?

Dr. Mary :

I think what's hard about teaching spiritual truths to children is that we might feel that because we don't have a degree in theology or a long Christian history, that we can't talk about Jesus. We can't talk about what the cross really means, or what it means to be forgive and be forgiven, you know? That cleansing spiritual sense.

I find it really a challenge, especially when talking with parents who don't have a Christian history, haven't been brought up on the church, that they feel that they can't talk to their kids about Jesus. I think we get so tied up in church talk and using the right terms that we forget to link spiritual truths to real life. You know, IRL, in real life, is a big deal. It is a big deal, because biblical truths are so relevant today. Somebody might say, "Well, the Bible is an old book." Well, sure. But it is so real. It is so in touch with right where we are today. I mean, how many times can't we just flip open the pages of a Bible and our eyes will go directly to a verse that speaks right to what we're dealing with, in this moment?

You know, we talk about being "in this moment," and being right in this real life, where it's happening right now. The Bible and these biblical truths help us do that, and I would really encourage parents, don't get hung up in your past and what relationship you've had with or outside

the church. Look instead at that spiritual nurturing that you can do with your child, regardless of your personal history.

Ask yourself, does the bookmark move in my Bible? My Bible is, I pulled it down, it's sitting right here beside me. It is full of Post-It notes. I've always had trouble with memorizing, especially things with numbers, and there are a lot of numbers in the Bible. So, what I do is I put a Post-It note on key pages in the Bible and so if you were here looking at my Bible, you'd see bright pink, and yellow, and green, and purple, and blue, all kinds of Post-It notes sticking out of this paperback Bible because it's my favorite. I really cherish this Bible.

So, I would encourage parents, go ahead and talk to your kids about what your faith means to you. Don't worry about using the right words. They'll hear your heart. It'll come through. I would encourage parents today, don't compartmentalize your faith. Don't put it in a little box that you open up on Sunday morning or Saturday night or Wednesday night, but really practice lifestyle Christianity, and that's the only thing I can really call it so that your children experience, not just see, but they experience what having a Christian parent really means.

That lifestyle Christianity, and that term, I just find as a really good kind of an umbrella concept. What does it mean to be a Christian today? If you think about that, everything that you do that matters is going to fall under that kind of marker.

Audra Haney:

That's great. Let's transition a little bit to reading because you have so many rich things to share on reading to our children, which really does help us set the stage for our child to have that vibrant walk with the Lord. Tell us about your experiences and your passion for this topic.

Dr. Mary :

Reading is still one of the best activities to do with a child. After all, even today's digi-kids know how to interpret symbols and letters to use their phone or their tablet, so reading is still important.

What we need to do as parents is to put our child in a language envelope. Long ago, a professor used that term, and that is the term that is really accurate. Make books, not a screen, the default in your house. When you do that, your child will be able to take the 10 step test, I call it, and find something to read. Whether it's a book or a magazine or a football card or the back of a cereal box, your child will be able to find something to read.

You know, we hope that our children will become independent readers, and that's what we're striving for. But even when they do that, even when they know how to decode, they what sound goes with what letter, and they can comprehend what they're reading, they still need to

see you read, and they need to be read to. They need to hear the nuances in your voice as you're reading.

In our house, it was kind of disconcerting as a mom when our daughter Angie would get the phone book. That was back in the old days when we actually had a phone book, but she would do that as a sign to say, "Mom, we haven't been to the library for three days." She would sit there and read the phone book. That was kind of a knock on the head to me that said, "Okay, we need to go back to the library."

We spend so much time trying to find the right toy for our child, especially at birthdays and Christmas and all that, but the most important thing is to find the right book for our child. We can do that all the time. When your library is your friend, I grew up on the streets of Chicago. My dad was an inner city pastor a mile north of the loop, and the library was a mile away. We would walk to the library. I still remember walking up those steps, those marble or concrete or some kind of steps, and feeling like I was walking into a treasure chest because I thought of all the wonderful adventures and friends I would meet on the pages of those books. I still have that feeling when I walk into a library. It is such a wonderful place.

So, I hope that parents today, whether they read with their child on a screen, or in print, that they read. That's what really, it comes down to reading, however you do it. Read with your child, and let them hear you read, and let them see you read.

Audra Haney:

That's great encouragement and I love that. We are huge library lovers here at our house too, and it's a great break for Mom, too. That story time or just to let your kid have that new adventure.

I think one thing, let's talk about the importance from reading from day one. I remember I got that advice, "As soon as you come home from the hospital, read to your baby," and it felt a little silly. Holding her little head up and reading, doing it at that moment felt silly, but it really has proved, now that we're three years into this, it had so much value. Why would you say that reading from day one is so important?

Dr. Mary :

Actually, in the seventh, eighth month of pregnancy, that 10 weeks before a baby's born, the fetus heart rate slows when mom speaks. That's really interesting because when you talk about reading from day one, you can even read and sing before your baby's born so that they begin to recognize your voice, to hear the lyricism in your voice, to hear that rhythmic tone as you speak. Surrounding your child in language beginning even before day one, can be a wonderful benefit to your child. Let them hear your voice.

With reading from day one on, when we're talking about real books, I agree. It can seem so odd. Positioning that little baby on your lap, kind of holding him up against your chest so that his head doesn't wobble, and reading to the child. But it's not just a book. It is time with you. What you're really doing is training yourself to prioritize reading, because you aren't gonna have a three month old reach for a book, unless it's some random response. It's you. You're training yourself to reach to your child. When you read, you are giving your time and attention, your lap and your love. That's what reading time encompasses, and that's a beautiful time whenever you do it with your child.

We think of kids who can just read on their own, and this is way beyond the newborn stage, but I think back to when one of our daughters was a tween. Those years when she was struggling in seventh grade as a cheerleader and trying to deal with the social jungle that she was involved in, and then she and I started reading Christian fiction together at night when she was going to bed. I would read one paragraph, and she would read the next. Or she would read one page, and I would read one page. Then we'd talk about the characters and what they were going through. We read through entire Christian fiction series during those tween years that can be so tough. I think that today, Angie, who loves books and who still loves to read, I think that made a difference for her because I wasn't giving her my lap anymore, but I still giving her my time and attention and love. Totally focused on her, and the book we were reading, and our conversations. Kids never outgrow your love of reading, and your love that you express when you set aside time to read.

Audra Haney:

That is a beautiful reminder and is there anything else you would like to add to encourage these new parents, or maybe even new grandparents?

Dr. Mary :

Really intentionally put together a support system, and look at three types of parents that you need in your support system. One is a parent with older children than yours, so that you can kind of look ahead and see what they're dealing with. Find those people who are coping with situations that you're going to probably be facing in the near future. Find out what their solutions are. Get their ideas. Talk to lots of people of older kids.

Then, find a peer parent. Somebody who has a child just about your child's age. That's a person you can depend on if your child forgets when their uniform is back due to the coach, you can call if there's a problem with the classroom situation and get a different perspective, so get a peer parent.

But also find a parent and put that parent in your support system who has younger children than yours because it's your turn to teach. Not from someone who has this exalted, "I'm a perfect parent," because there aren't any. But who can relate. Who can say, "I know how it feels to be up all night with a child who has an ear infection. I know how it feels, and I empathize with you." Or, "Here's what I tried, and it worked for me."

So, make an intentional effort to put together a support system with those three types of parents.

Audra Haney: Dr. Mary, that is more beautiful advice, and you've shared so many helpful things today, and we are so thankful for your time. Would you mind just wrapping up our interview today by praying for these new parents and grandparents and blessing them on their journey?

Dr. Mary : Dear Lord, walk alongside those who listen to this podcast. Help them learn to lean on You, to drop their concerns, worries, and guilt at the foot of the cross so they really feel free to parent as You lead. Give them patience to wait for answers, and endurance to get through tough situations within a bigger framework of the hopeful living that only You offer. Lead our listeners to celebrate with their families, both up and down and across the generations. The joy in their life journey that comes from knowing You as Savior and Lord. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Audra Haney: Thank you so much for joining us today. We hope you will join us again next week as we learn and grow together as new parents. If you visit our website, you can find out more about Dr. Mary Manz Simon, and her books. Also, in August, we released our long anticipated pre-parenting Bible study for couples and groups called, "Your Newborn Promise Project," and as a special gift for our podcast listeners, you can get 20% off the purchase of that book with the code "NPPodcast." You can find all of that at grahamblanchard.com.