*Episode 23: Newcomers to Faith Learn Together*

*With guest Amy Ezell*

Audra Haney: Thanks for tuning in to the Newborn Promise podcast, a production of Graham Blanchard, Incorporated. You are listening to an interview with Amy Ezell called 'Newcomers to Faith Learn Today.' For today's show notes, transcript, and more information about your Newborn Promise Project, please visit GrahamBlanchard.com. ...

 Welcome back to the Newborn Promise podcast. I'm Audra Haney. The idea of starting anything from scratch can be daunting. For first generation believers who are new to the faith, sharing Jesus with their children can even be downright intimidating. Today, Amy Ezell, a passionate mom and faithful church preschool teacher shares encouragement for these families who are learning new things together. Her personal testimony and ideas from when her children were young remind us that sometimes things made from scratch, things that require both creativity and intentionality are the most beautiful things; and totally worth the effort. We also want to apologize for a small clicking noise during the episode. It was the result of a poor Skype connection, but we hope it's not too distracting from Amy's great message.

 Well Amy, we are so excited to have you with us today. Not only are you a mom, you have two children in college and a 13 year old boy, but you've been so involved in teaching children in the church, including [MOPS 00:01:50] mentoring, and preschool teacher for a very large church in Austin. We are so excited to hear your wisdom and insight and ideas today. Before we dive in, do you mind just sharing a little bit of your personal testimony?

Amy Ezell: I was not raised in a home from a Christian faith. It was a very loving home and I'm grateful for my mother and my father. They did the best they possibly could. I do remember as a small child my mother let me go to a VBS; a week long class. I loved it. I realize now that God planted those little seeds right there because learning His word and His ways, those things are not void. They last forever, and so I was hungry for that. Then, once I met people in high school and college that had a firm faith, it was a very inviting thing. I was very curious and interested.

 The Lord puts specific people in my path; and so randomly get a college roommate but mine happened to be a pastor's daughter. She was just a lovely young lady, and was very loving, and kind, and invited me to go to church with her throughout college. That seed was planted. Then, once I graduated, my roommate after college, she was from a Presbyterian family. She really had a significant role in my faith. I'm forever grateful for that.

Audra Haney: Amy, that's a beautiful testimony. How did your life change after you accepted Christ as your savior and really began to follow him?

Amy Ezell: Well, the good news is I have a beautiful relationship with my father. It's always known that that's a very significant, important part of a loving relationship with our heavenly Father. That connection was easy for me. It was just the piece of knowing, 'You know what? I am saved, and I do believe, and there [inaudible 00:04:01] ... eternal life.' Those things bring incredible security, peace, and ... just knowing that I'm forgiven and that God is a God of second chances. I'm so grateful.

Audra Haney: Tell us a little bit about your journey after becoming a believer. How did you begin to grow in your knowledge of God, and the Bible, with all of this being so new? How did you find support as you walked out your new faith?

Amy Ezell: I understood the ABCs of becoming a Christian, and to accept and believe, and confess. Trying to take in the scriptures and understand even how to flip through the Bible was work. I got baptized I guess ... when I was 24. Going to church, I really enjoyed it. I got married at 28. My husband and I went to a lot of Bible study classes. We were in Sunday school. My husband was my spiritual rock. He was raised in a Christian home, so he was so loving in his leadership to guide. That was a really helpful thing. Just sitting and being a part of Bible studies, you're learning and you're growing.

 Once I realized that I had to teach it to somebody else, all of a sudden, that's the realization of, 'Wow, I don't know if I know how to do that.' What I did was I just gathered resources. I'm one of those resource-types of people. ... Children's Bibles, and children's books, and anything I could to try to learn those little stories that everybody else knew. It's almost comical, but I didn't even know Noah's Arc as a child. I didn't know any of those little children's Bible stories.

 The point is, God can do something with nothing. I'm ... definitely somebody who represents that, because I really ... I had no knowledge. It just took time and patience. I got to learn with my children. I think that was really fun to learn with them.

Audra Haney: Then Amy, as you went on to have children, you really sought God about how to teach them your faith. Being a first time generation believer, what would you say to parents who are in a similar situation that maybe have insecurities or doubts about sharing their faith with their children, or talking about Jesus?

Amy Ezell: Feeling insecure about understanding ... Jesus' teaching is, to me, I can identify with completely. I guess first of all, being in groups and being ... in a study, that's a very helpful, loving place to start. Even though feeling like, 'I don't know anything these people know in this group.' Usually people in the group, there's more than one that feels like that. God is so patient and kind. It makes it, for me, so much easier to be in a group when I know there's different levels. Usually, leaders in groups, I've found ... I've had so many mentors. I think that's the most important thing, finding mentors. People that have been where you are going; and somebody that you possibly admire. Those are the things, to me, that the church represents; and those groups represent, if you can be a part of that. Feeling insecure and staying away from the church and those groups, for me, I know that wouldn't have helped me. Diving in and having people around me, loving me, that is the most encouraging thing.

Audra Haney: How were you intentional about finding mentors and seeking out that help? What did that look like for you and how did you decide who to pick and how to ask? That seems really brave to me.

Amy Ezell: First of all, in one of the churches we were members of in Dallas, there was a young mothers group, and then there were older, mentor mom groups; which, that was a really unique thing to have at a church. It was so helpful because they would come alongside, and so that was a wonderful resource. I got to know one woman who wasn't a lot older than me, but just hadn't ... just amazing wisdom in raising children in a Godly home. She was so very helpful to me. My prayer is that other people would be able to have those.

 I know another church we were members of in Dallas, there were mentoring groups. People would intentionally ask, "Hey, will you mentor me?" You're right, it takes a little guts to do that.

 I think when I put my humble hat on, I realize, 'Wow, I'm so broken and messed up. I don't know ... even know where to start.' That's the beauty of God putting people in our lives. I see that, that has been a very helpful thing. I know there's mentor groups here in the area where I live in Austin, where it's a program, where it's a mentoring mothers group. Those kinds of group [inaudible 00:09:39] ... very helpful. Of course, looking in God's word, where all of our resources are; but being able to move through that information with somebody who might be older and wiser and have more experience is always a helpful tool.

Audra Haney: That's great advice. Amy, your story really has come full circle. You know you have those beautiful memories of being so touched by VBS as a young child. Now you really invest a lot of your life and energy into ministering to young children inside the church. Tell me about that calling and why this work is so special to you?

Amy Ezell: Well, when I think about it, it is almost comical because of where I came from. Because I loved and enjoyed teaching my children, and we had so much fun, I realized the value and the importance of it, and realized what a foundation it gives children. I think a child is never too young to hear a story, to hear Bible verses, to hear anything biblical. A pastor that I read a lot of his books, I admire when he speaks about training up a child or teaching them God's word.

 He said, "Think of it as like a shopping spree for the mind. It's a chance to collect and store treasures you'll enjoy forever." That's [inaudible 00:11:05]. Those Bible verses, if you can teach children when they're young, it truly plants a seed. It will stay with them throughout their life. I guess that was my motivation. There was just an opportunity to serve in our church. Our family started teaching. That became a really special thing that we all did together, is we taught the twos, the threes, the four year olds, the five year olds. There's something you can give to each of those little ones.

Audra Haney: I love your heart in that. Like you said, it certainly is so important to pour into these young hearts. It doesn't come back void. Amy, how did you bring this heart for teaching into your home as a first time believer? How did that play out in everyday life? What were some creative and intentional ways you were sharing God with your kids?

Amy Ezell: Well, you're right. It's something you have to make room for. It's not easy. There's many [inaudible 00:12:09] ... mom and dad tasks that need to be done in the family. When my children were very young, I would tell them we'd have mommy school. That was just literally maybe 30 minutes where I think through, and they'd ... we'd read stories. We'd do a little craft. It always had something to do with a Biblical character, or a character virtue; something like that where they would be learning and thinking.

 Even to take it a step further, if we were on the go, it would be something that would sound more like if I was at the grocery store, I would make sure I brought up, "You know what? Your dad works so hard. You know, it allows us to go to the grocery store and buy things, so I want to be a good steward." It was just weaved throughout the day. If we were going to visit somebody, if our word of the week was respect, we'd talk about how we could honor other people and what God says about respect. What that would look like. It was more fleshing it out throughout the day. There were times at home when we'd be intentional and spend time. We'd always read to our children. I would ...

 If anything, if you can't do anything, just read. Reading, to me, ... If I read to my child for a good 20, 30 minutes, then I felt like, 'Okay, we did something today.' Not every day's going to look the same, and I realize that. Everybody knows that. Just being able to read to them, and put up the phone, and not look at it; but be an all there mom in those times. It's easy to say, but it can be a really hard thing to do.

 For me, I always had to have my own aim or goals, and think in mind, I had to plan out, 'Okay, what do I want to teach my children?' I guess the thing is to back up from there and realize that before my husband and I had children, we created our own mission statement around, 'Okay, who are we? What is our identity? What do we stand for?' My husband, being our spiritual rock, he selected a scripture. It happened to be Matthew 5:16, 'Let your light shine before man.' We didn't teach our children that whole long Bible verse. We just shortened it, 'Let your light shine.' When they're very young years; so they would connect that, remember who you are, remember who your identity. We had this little saying about who we were, the Ezells. We honor God. We show love, kindness, and respect, and we think of others. Those were the little things that we planted in their hearts of who they were.

 Then from that, then we had to decide as parents, 'Okay, that meant at meal time, praying. That meant devotions. That meant stories,' not all stories, but most of our stories were someone intentional. They were stories that led them to God, the Father who loves you, your heavenly Father who cares for you. Just a life thinking that way.

Audra Haney: Amy, you are very creative and have a lot of great ideas for teaching children with crafts. What are some of your favorite easy go-tos when it comes to creatively implementing these lessons? It doesn't have to be complicated.

Amy Ezell: I'm a very methodical thinker. Everything has to make sense intentionally when I do something. Then I kind of have this art side to me. It was a good outlet. What I mean by [inaudible 00:15:59] was if we were learning a Bible verse, I made little Bible cards that we'd have at the kitchen table. I made it real colorful with, say a character word in the front. On the back, it would be an explanation. Then, there would be scriptures to support it; but they would be very simple and very colorful.

 We'd just take one Bible verse a month and learn, and hide it in their little hearts. We could either sing it or say it. Then, we'd read stories that pertain to that. Then, we'd make crafts that would pertain to that. Those things I enjoyed with them. Now, that sounds like an all day thing, but it would be spread out [inaudible 00:16:48] throughout a month; because there's other things you have to do as a mother as well. [inaudible 00:16:54] ... I would try to encourage them in those character traits. If it was kindness was our character word, we'd learn a Bible verse; maybe it would be Ephesians 4:32, 'Be kind and tender to one another.' Then I would go out of my way to find them doing kind things, and encourage them, and compliment them.

 "Oh, I love the way you were so kind to your sister and shared." Or, I would use those words a lot to try to flesh it out, so that they could live it out. I'd take Popsicle sticks after we had Popsicles, and I would write little Bible verse on the front. Then on the back, because remember, it would be a very simplified version of scripture. Instead of some long scripture, I would shorten it. We'd have those at the table, and then I made little prayer cards. I would laminate them and put them in their room so that they would have something to look at, once they started reading. I'd let them color them and ... where they would become their own.

 Then of course, the beauty of music. There's so many great [inaudible 00:18:08] Christian music where it's Bible verses to catchy music. Those helped me more than they help my children.

Audra Haney: Yes, we can really relate to that in our home. I love some of our scripture CDs, even more than my children do. Amy, I love how you really emphasize that this has to start in the home. Share about some of the amazing benefits to allowing a child to be a part of a church class as well.

Amy Ezell: Well, I think the whole structure of a little school, I see the children thrive in that. They love the scripture, the songs they sing, the hand movements. All those things are developmentally important. They're play, they're ... Those are the things that I notice that they love. They love the memory, the scripture memory. They're excited that they've learned that. I think it's rewarding to see them learn it and hide it in their hearts, and pray for them. The families are hungry to come and learn. Of course, they want the best for their children. There's a lot of support at the church. I think ... it's a really good connection for both.

Audra Haney: Why would you say it's important to maybe find out what your child was learning in that class, and build on it more even at home after class is over?

Amy Ezell: Well, I think once again, it adds to those discussion time. Asking questions or making sure teachers send things home, if you an interest, being able to communicate those things that you want to take it a step further. I think also being able to have resources at home is very important, to have your own that you can read to your children. I think we fool ourselves when we think in our mind, we're just going to take our child to Sunday school and that's where their faith will grow and develop. I know I realized that, that's just the beginning point. What happens at home and the amount of time that we spend together as a family and cultivate and nurture our faith, that's the part, to me, that is very necessary and important.

Audra Haney: What would be your one big piece of advice to these moms and dads who are first generation believers, and really longing to pass their faith on to their children?

Amy Ezell: I think knowing that God loves us more than we could ever imagine and that ... He has so much joy from us diving in. It doesn't matter where we start. It's similar to me of thinking ... because I like to exercise. It is not a sprint. It is a marathon. It's baby steps. If you have come from no Christian education or role models, God will provide. He does that through the church, through loving people. I had so many amazing mentors in my life that helped me. I can see through that, that helped me so much and gave me confidence when I didn't feel that I was equipped. Believe me, there's more days I don't feel unequipped, but I just think having a plan ...

 We all have jobs BC, 'before children.' We had action plans and we had goals. We set our sights on things that we were going to accomplish. Having children is far greater than any job I've ever had. I realized that I had to be intentional. I [inaudible 00:22:06] come up with a plan, and I had to execute it. Not every day was going to look like I wanted it to, but I knew that there were a few things that I wanted to accomplish. That was loving my children well, spending time with them, being all there. If it was 10 or 15 minutes on the floor playing, reading, those are very important memories that can never be erased. Those are the things that I would encourage parents with, just to seek God and His truths. That's the best advice you could ever give. It's found in the Bible. Luckily, there's beautiful people like at Graham Blanchard and other authors that are able to communicate those truths through books, through resources. To me, those are invaluable.

Audra Haney: Amy, this is beautiful encouragement. Is there anything else before we close our time out together that you would like to share?

Amy Ezell: I think you have this life before you have children, where for me, I can kind of control that life and execute. But then, God gave me these little children. It was definitely a stretch and a growth for me. I'm a mom who's still learning and always struggling. I realize that God allowed me to be a mother to grow me. That's my ah-ha that I've learned, that the beauty of this whole thing is I've gotten to enjoy the ride because I was stretched and I've grown.

Audra Haney: That's such wonderful encouragement. I think many of us can relate to that truth. Amy, would you mind praying for our listeners as we close out our show today?

Amy Ezell: Lord, may you just bless our families. I pray for families that are growing and that are new. May you help them adjust and transition to new seasons of life. May you guide parents who are moving to different stages of child rearing. Please Lord, intercede for each of us. Fill us with your grace. Fulfill our needs and remind us daily that you are our strength. Make growth continue as you lead us, Lord. In your son's precious name, we pray, dear Lord, amen.

Audra Haney: Well thank you so much for joining us for this amazing interview with Amy. Remember, you can get today's show notes, transcript, and resources for the whole family, our children's board books, activity books, and your Newborn Promise Project, at GrahamBlanchard.com.