Bob: There are things we can be doing, as parents, during the season when our kids are in elementary school to prepare them for the challenges their faith will face when they get to high school. Here is Phil Vischer.

Phil: So many kids get their faith knocked out from under them when they are in high school or college because they are being confronted with questions from a hostile source for the first time; and no one ever asked those questions in a friendly environment. The kind of questions that they are going to get hit with in high school—they don’t need to get hit with when they are two—but if you present them in a gentle way when they are seven, eight, nine—by the time they are in high school, they’ve already got those answers.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, February 25th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I’m Bob Lepine. You’ll find us online at FamilyLifeToday.com. For your child’s faith to sustain itself in their teen years, they need more than just a collection of Bible stories they learned when they were a child. They need to understand the big story of the Bible. We’re going to talk about that with Phil Vischer today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. You know what most people don’t know when they turn on a VeggieTales episode is that there’s a mom to thank for the VeggieTales stories. The mom we’re talking about is the mom of the inventor of VeggieTales, Phil Vischer, who is joining us again on FamilyLife Today. Welcome back, Phil.

Phil: Hey; thanks for having me back.

Bob: Phil is the guy, who 25 years ago, in his kitchen, came up with talking vegetables and the rest is history. He’s gone on to be an author, a speaker; he’s got a podcast. He’s just come out with a new Bible storybook for kids called the Laugh and Learn Bible for Kids.

When I talk about your mom getting some of the credit for this—

Phil: Yes.
Bob: —she was actually on staff with Big Idea when you started this; right?

Phil: No; she was part of our foundation later on. When I started that, she was on staff with David C. Cook.

Bob: Okay.

Phil: She was a Sunday school curriculum editor.

Bob: And you had to run stuff by her?

Phil: She has her doctorate in Child Development and Spiritual Formation. When I first came up with the idea, I went to her and said: “It will be vegetables teaching the Bible. Do you see any issues? [Laughter] Tell me if you see issues.” [Laughter]

Dave: I’ve got to hear that conversation. What did she say?!

Phil: She said three things—three things, which became the ground rules of VeggieTales. She said, “Number one, you will not portray Jesus as a vegetable.” [Laughter] I thought—

Ann: —“That’s wise.”

Dave: Good start.

Phil: —“Okay; yes. I can see where you are coming from.”

“When number two, you will not imply that vegetables can have redemptive relationships with Christ.” “Okay; this is getting tricky.”

Dave: Wow.

Phil: This is why—to explain what that looks like in VeggieTales: Bob and Larry never pray when they are on the kitchen countertop, because they are actually being vegetables. They will pray if they are pretending to be biblical characters in a story; so if they’re playing the roles of humans, they will pray. If they are actually being themselves as vegetables, they don’t pray because they are vegetables.

Then she said, “Number three, as often as you can, the most important thing you can do is to remind kids how God made them special and how He loves them—how much He loves them.” I thought, “Okay; I need like a catch phrase for the end of every show: ‘Just remember kids: God made you special, and He loves you very much.’” That is the message of VeggieTales. My mother effectively saved VeggieTales from the mistakes I could have made.
Bob: You have clearly, over the last quarter century, spent a lot of time thinking about biblical themes, about character, about how to best press these things into the hearts of kids. What are most moms and dads doing that they should stop doing, or what are they not doing that they should start doing?

Phil: Oh, that’s tricky. I think we should stop over-complicating things. Sometimes, we’re worried that our four-year-old isn’t quite grasping the entire gospel. They are not going to because they—developmentally, they are not ready.

Bob: Right.

Phil: If you can’t think abstractly, it’s very hard to understand the concept of redemption—so many deep, biblical concepts that you can’t understand until you can think abstractly.

Bob: Can I illustrate this for you?

Phil: Go for it.

Bob: My son, when he was six or seven years old, one day we’re driving a long. He said, “Hey; Dad, I know who the chief Indian man is.” I said, “What do you mean the chief Indian man? What are you talking about?” He said, “The chief Indian man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” [Laughter] I thought, “This catechism thing we’re doing is not connecting with him the way I intended for it to.”

Phil: It’s something that we just barely missed.

Bob: So, you do have to—

Phil: Yes.

Bob:—keep it—

Phil: Right.

Bob:—simple.

Phil: Right. Let’s meet kids where they are, not worry that they can’t grasp the whole thing. What we, then, can make the mistake in doing is trying to protect them from hard questions—you wait too long.

You know, does a two-year-old need to know about sin, or about doubts, and people questioning the authority of the Bible, or where did the Bible come from, or what’s with all the weird rules in Leviticus, and why do we only follow some of them and we ignore others? The kind of questions that they are going to get hit with in high school—they
don’t need to get hit with when they are two—but if you present them in a gentle way when they are seven, eight, nine—by the time they are in high school, they have already got those answers.

So many kids get their faith knocked out from under them when they are in high school or college because they are being confronted with questions from a hostile source for the first time, and no one ever asked those questions in a friendly environment. That’s something I’ve tried to do extensively in What’s in the Bible? It also comes up in the kids’ Bible.

**Bob:** In the kids’ Bible—the *Laugh and Learn Bible for Kids*—you tell the story of Job. At the end of the story of Job, in the Tricky Bits—because at the end of each story, you’ve got a little family connection—Tricky Bits: “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

**Phil:** Yes.

**Bob:** This has been around for a while—that question; right?

**Phil:** Quite a while.

**Bob:** Your answer here is: “This is one of the trickiest questions about faith. The simple answer is because we live in a broken world. See, when Adam and Eve sinned, God’s perfect world became broken. Everything changed except God. He’s always good, and He’s always with us no matter what.” That doesn’t resolve everything for a child.

**Phil:** No; we always want to resolve everything. Bad things happen because we live in a broken world, and we can’t explain them all. Some of them are just because it’s bad. When you tell the story of Job, and you’re looking for that answer/Job wanted that answer: “Why did this happen?” He doesn’t get the answer—God shows up; God just says, “Hey; who is God?”

**Bob:** Job says, “Okay; that’s all—

**Ann:** That was enough.

**Bob:** —“I need to know”; right.

**Phil:** Literally, puts his hand over his mouth and says, “I have spoken about things that I do not understand.”

**Bob:** Yes.

**Phil:** It’s okay—we don’t want to admit to our kids that there are things we don’t understand, so we make up simplistic understandings. That sets up our kids on a very
dangerous path of having simplistic understandings that can be easily undermined when they leave the house.

**Bob:** So, as a parent, to say: “There are things that are hard to understand in the Bible—things I still don’t understand—but here is what I do know: God is good.

**Phil:** Yes.

**Bob:** “God loves us.”

**Phil:** We think us not having certainty will undermine our kid’s faith. It actually builds it when they see us wrestling, because they are going to wrestle. They are either going to live in denial, or they are going to wrestle. If they never see their parents wrestle, the first time they wrestle with their faith, they’ll think they are doing something wrong. We don’t want them to think they are doing something wrong because they have a doubt.

There are doubters in the Bible; it’s easy to have doubts. It’s healthy to have doubts because it’s how you get through to the other side to faith; because faith ultimately isn’t knowing for sure—that’s not the definition of faith—it’s believing and acting as if you have found something to be true; then, afterwards, finding out that it is true. That’s what we need to encourage our kids to.

**Dave:** Okay; what do you say to the parent that gets to that Tricky Bits at the end of the Job story and thinks: “You know, I've got a four-year-old,” “…six-year-old,” “…seven-year-old. I don’t think I want to actually bring this up, because I’m going to create something in their brain that they shouldn’t be thinking about yet.” Obviously, they should; why should they?

**Phil:** Well, it depends on how young they are.

**Dave:** Yes.

**Phil:** If they are really, really young, and you feel uncomfortable about something, just skip it. You know your kids better than I do.

**Dave:** Yes.

**Phil:** But don’t skip it forever because sometime between two and high school, they need to be able to wrestle with tricky questions, independent from you.

**Ann:** Phil, what did that look like for you, as a dad? Did your kids ask some hard questions? You know, did you just become a character? How did you teach this in your home with you and your wife?
Phil: I don’t think I necessarily did a great job, because I was so young; you know? You never know everything you’re going to know when you start with kids. You all/everyone starts out kind of ignorant.

What I tried to do, as my kids were starting to grow up, was externalize my own journey with God. I realized that, as an introvert, I was having a pretty significant journey with God; but I wasn’t sure that they knew about it, because I’m an introvert. I don’t just—so I had to kind of force myself. What you are experiencing with God, make it a subject at the dinner table/bring it out. Whether it is good or bad—whether you are wrestling or celebrating, whether you are singing a psalm of praise or a psalm of lament—sing it, openly, with your kids; and they will see your journey.

It’s not even as much as: “Am I teaching all the right things at the right times?” but “Am I showing them what it looks like to live this way?” Also, put them in context, where they are getting good, solid teaching—in church, whether it’s resources—because not everyone is a great Bible teacher; that’s okay. We have great Bible teachers; I mean, I go to great Bible teachers. Then I try to figure out how to put those cookies down on a lower shelf for the kids. Find the good resources and work on your own journey, and make sure you’re journey is visible to your kids. I think that will do more than just about anything else.

Bob: I think that is so important; and it’s an area that I wasn’t good at, as a parent, because I thought my job was to live out a model existence.

Phil: Do it perfectly.

Bob: Yes—to put my righteousness on display in front of my kids. Well, there’s a name for people who put their righteousness on display—we call them Pharisees; right?

Phil: No, that’s not Bob.

Dave: I was going to say, “Bob.”

Phil: I was going to say, “Bob.” [Laughter]

Bob: Well, maybe, that’s synonymous in some cases, which is sad; but I thought, “If I showed the cracks/if I show the failings, that I’m somehow undermining what I’m supposed to be living.” I wish there’d been more confession of sin on my part with my kids. I wish there had been more: “Here is what I’m struggling with…” or “Here’s what I don’t understand…”—just living out the reality of my faith in front of my kids—rather than thinking, “I’ve got to have this buttoned down and have the answers for them anytime they ask the questions.”

Phil: I also think there is a huge role for grandparents. I am now a grandparent; and I
recognize, “When I was 25 and had a 2-year-old, I was not very mature.” Now, I’m 53, and I have a 2-year-old again.

**Bob:** You’ve got more to say this time; don’t you?

**Phil:** Yes, so rather than pressuring my daughter and son-in-law: “Do it all right!

**Bob:** Yes.

**Phil:** —“Don’t do it exactly the way I did it, because I didn’t know anything when I was your age.” Well, they are in the same place I was.

That’s where grandparents come in. Jump in with your grandkids and teach them the Bible, and make sure your kids have the resources so that they can get help; because they are struggling just as much as you did when you were that age.

**Bob:** Right.

**Phil:** Then there is also the community. If you are not in a community of believers—like Sunday school teachers—my nieces and nephews; my wife and I have played a role in their faith journey, not because their parents weren’t doing it right, but because we all do it differently. We all bring something different to it—being able to have interactions with other adults that aren’t your parents—because there are certainly phases in your childhood, where the last people you want to listen to are your actual parents; but you’ll listen to a Sunday school teacher; you’ll listen to a youth group leader.

When my parents’ marriage fell apart, and I kind of lost faith in my own parents, it was youth group leaders that I put my trust in. I said, “Okay; I’ll believe this coming from you because you didn’t let me down.” As parents, we let our kids down—it’s inevitable, whether it is in little ways or big ways—but having other adults that are close enough to them that your kids can turn to them and say, “What do you think about this?” “Well, did you ask your mom?” “No; I will ask her later. What do you think about this?”

Having people in your kids’ lives that can do that—that’s why it is so important. You can’t Christian alone; I mean, technically, you cannot Christian alone. You Christian in bodies of people/groups of people, and that’s also where you raise the next generation.

**Ann:** That’s good.

**Bob:** We talked about this a little earlier, but *VeggieTales* has been resurrected.

**Phil:** Yes!

**Bob:** At Christmastime, there was a Christmas special. There are—did you say 18 new episodes?
Phil: Eighteen new episodes in production right now, and we’re just starting to write eight more; so there will be twenty-six new VeggieTales episodes.

Bob: What stories are you telling that you haven’t told before? I mean, give us a little sneak—

Phil: OH! There are so many stories, Bob. There’s the story of the Pharisee with the radio show; that’s a fun one. [Laughter] Really enjoyed that one. No; I’m sorry. That’s terribly unkind. [Laughter]

Bob: No; I didn’t see that coming. Though I’m afraid—

Ann: Could you write a song about that?

Phil: Yes; a song. There always is a song—has to be a song. Stories like Abigail and Abel from the Old Testament. Stories like the prodigal son that were too short for doing a 45-minute DVD—

Bob: Right.

Phil: —for VeggieTales. But because the new show is in a variety show format, I can do these really short, fun little Bible stories: Paul and Silas in prison, singing in the back of the prison, while the jailer—Pa Grape is the jailer.

Bob: Got it.

Phil: [voice of Pa Grape] “What is going on here?! How can you guys be happy when you’re in jail?” [Laughter]

Dave: I want to hear the song.

Ann: Yes; can—did you—

Dave: What song do they sing?

Ann: Can you sing a part of a song?

Phil: I don’t remember which song it was. I just wrote it; I don’t memorize it. [Laughter] I’ve written like 40 songs in the last 6 months.

Bob: These are initially going to be showing up on TBN.

Phil: They’ll be on TBN first, and then they’ll be streaming places, and to DVDs, and whatever else. Children will ride bikes down the street, handing them out on little
pamphlets. [Laughter] Distribution has become very challenging. There are no more Christian bookstores, so we have to enlist children to go house to house.

**Bob:** Have you listened to the Millennials, who grew up on *VeggieTales*, process—

**Phil:** Yes?

**Bob:** —their own experience of growing up on *VeggieTales*? The podcasts that are being done now about Veggie—do you listen to this stuff?

**Phil:** No; I try not to. It gets a little weird.

**Dave:** I’m glad you brought it up, Bob.

**Ann:** Have you, Bob?

**Bob:** Well, yes.

**Phil:** What should I know about it?

**Bob:** Well, I just/I know that there are people kind of deconstructing everything about their evangelical childhood—

**Phil:** Yes; oh, yes.

**Bob:** —right?

**Phil:** That definitely is true.

**Bob:** They are processing what *Adventures in Odyssey* was all about; they are processing what *VeggieTales* was all about.

**Phil:** Yes.

**Bob:** They are finding the good, the bad, and the ugly in all of it. I just wondered if you are tuning in to hear what they are saying.

**Phil:** I try not to. If I see it on Twitter®, you know, there is a little social media that I have to follow just to not to be dead—

**Bob:** Right.

**Phil:** —you know? I’d be written off as: “Too bad he died. Haven’t seen him on Twitter,”—because they’ll actually have a funeral for you; people will show up. [Laughter] If you don’t show up on social media for six months, you’re—
Dave: —you’re dead.

Phil: —your obituary shows up in the Chicago Tribune. [Laughter] So, I have to do, at least, a little bit.

I’ve bumped into so many kids—and these college-aged kids/young adults, who just say the same thing—they say, “Thank you for my childhood,”—because they were in a home, where there was so much media that was considered just not beneficial: “It was like the one thing that we can all agree on that we actually enjoy that my parents wanted me to watch AND I wanted to watch was VeggieTales.”

To realize, you’ve been that central in someone’s childhood gives you a real—I mean, Mr. Rogers is one of my heroes; you know? He was so central to so many childhoods—and have just a little/just a little bit of that is like the coolest thing in the world.

Bob: If you’re deconstructing the original VeggieTales—

Phil: Yes?—am I, Bob?

Bob: Well, you’re getting a chance to do this.

Ann: He is.

Phil: Oh, yes; okay.

Bob: Because, by making 18 new—

Phil: —18 new ones.

Bob: —episodes—

Phil: Yes.

Bob: —you’re getting a chance to say, “Here’s how I would do it today.”

Phil: Yes; yes.

Bob: So, what are you doing today that’s different than what you were doing 25 years ago?

Phil: Yes; not assuming that kids can adopt a Christian behavior simply because you’ve told them to adopt the Christian behavior; you know?—“Be forgiving because God says so.”
Bob: Right.

Phil: Trying to shift the lesson to be a little less about us and a little more about God; because if we learn how forgiving God is, it can *inspire* us to want to be more forgiving rather than oblige us.

Bob: Move from character qualities to the biblical anchor.

Phil: More theology.

Bob: Yes.

Phil: More to theology: “What does the Bible teach us about forgiveness?”

Bob: This is something—I bring this up because you talked about this in the *Art of Parenting®* video series that you were a part of. By the way, thank you for being a part of that.

Phil: Oh, you’re welcome. I hope to see it someday. [Laughter]

Bob: Well, you’re kind of past the *Art of Parenting* phase; but—

Phil: Yes; I am.

Bob: —we can get you a copy of it before you’re done here. You talked about the fact that, if we try to produce or urge our children to produce flesh-generated character, that can work for a while—

Phil: Yes.

Bob: —but that’s ultimately going to fail them. We’ve got to teach them how to—

Phil: Yes.

Bob: —live from the Spirit.

Phil: The fruit of the Spirit is, in fact, called the fruit of the *Spirit*.

Bob: Yes.

Phil: It’s not the “fruit of John,” or “the fruit of Sam,” or “the fruit of Mary”; it’s the fruit of the Spirit because you can’t make it on your own. You know, I’ve heard so many people teach the fruit of the Spirit and say, “Okay; now, you need to do better at this.” Like, “No, that’s the whole point—is you can’t—
Bob: “You can’t”; yes.

Phil: —“do better at this,”—that’s Paul’s point. This will only happen, not when you’re focused on those things/not when you are focused on behaving better, but when you’re focused on walking with Jesus. When you walk with Jesus, you become a different kind of tree; and a different kind of tree produces different kind of fruit, whether it wants to or not.

Bob: Yes.

Phil: That’s such, I think, a freeing message for kids that, to follow Jesus doesn’t mean you have to perfect yourself. It’s not an exercise in self-perfection. It’s simply following Jesus.

Dave: Be root-focused, not fruit-focused.

Phil: OH!

Bob: Well, that’s good; that works.

Phil: Did you use that in a sermon?

Dave: I wish I could say I did. [Laughter] I would love to say I did.

Bob: It'll be in the next sermon; won’t it?

Dave: You know, what’s sort of funny about it is—it came from a kid, who grew up listening and watching VeggieTales.

Phil: Really?

Dave: Yes; my son.

Phil: Oh, wow!

Dave: He said that in a sermon, and I wrote it down like that. It’s a good one; you know? Because that’s what we do—we are fruit-focused; that’s all about behavior.

Phil: Yes.

Dave: It’s like: “No; it’s about the root, Jesus, the vine.”

Phil: We do this same thing in other areas of our lives, where we’re focused on the outcomes—
Dave: Yes.

Phil: —not on obedience.

Bob: This is why I love being able to recommend a book like *Laugh and Learn Bible for Kids* because I know the worldview/the theological worldview that is informing the telling of these stories. This the perspective parents are going to be passing on to their kids, and I’m just thrilled to have this. I’m thrilled that you were able to spend a little time with us and talk about this.

Phil: Well, thank you. I think a lot of parents, deep down, are afraid that the Bible actually doesn’t make sense; and if we actually try to read it all with our kids, it’s just not going to make sense. This is the privilege—is to point out: “No; it does.

Bob: Yes.

Phil: “The Bible makes sense. It tells a story; it’s cohesive; and it’s a cohesive way of life to follow Jesus.”

Ann: Phil, you’ve done a great job of threading the whole storyline of seeing Jesus from the beginning to the end. It’s beautifully illustrated, and I would encourage every parent to get this book/every grandparent because you will love it. It’s deep; and yet, it’s simple. It’s something that every household, I think, should have this. I’m going to get these for our grandkids.

Bob: Thanks for being with us.

Phil: Thanks for having me.

Bob: We’ve got copies of the *Laugh and Learn Bible for Kids* that’s—that’s really for elementary-aged kids; and then we’ve got the *Laugh and Learn Bible for Little Ones* that’s for younger/preschool kids. Go to our website, FamilyLifeToday.com, to get your copy of either of those or multiple copies if you’d like.

In fact, we’re doing something—I mentioned this earlier—we’re doing, this week, those of you, who are longtime *FamilyLife Today* listeners—and you know who you are: you’ve listened for a while; you like the program; you tune in regularly—we want to ask you to join us as FamilyLife® Legacy Partners.

David Robbins, who is the president of FamilyLife, is here with us. Explain for our listeners what a Legacy Partner is.

David: Legacy Partners are people who come alongside FamilyLife and: “I believe in what you do. I believe in getting biblical practical help and hope out to parents and
families and marriages.” They join us month to month; they commit to a specific amount and join us, month to month, in helping us be on air in your community. We did a survey recently and asked our Legacy Partners why they give, month to month, because it is certainly a commitment.

**Bob:** Right.

**David:** Julia told us—and I quote: “We truly believe that the family is the conduit for Christ in neighborhoods, towns, and states; and that FamilyLife is a true vehicle of God’s plan and love for the family, and one of the major hopes for the future.” Thanks, Julia—

**Bob:** Yes.

**David:** —first of all. Let me just say, “Thanks,” to Legacy Partners because that is our desire—to be a conduit for Christ in your community.

**Bob:** Well, we like to see our number of Legacy Partners grow this month. We’ve had some friends of the ministry, who have come along, and say, “We’d like to help you with that.” They’ve agreed that anybody who, this week, becomes a brand-new Legacy Partner—they are going to match every donation that new Legacy Partner makes in 2020. They are going to match it, dollar for dollar, up to a total of $30,000. That is a pretty good deal, so your Legacy Partner gift gets double duty when you become a Legacy Partner this week.

In addition, we’ll send you a copy of the *Laugh and Learn Bible for Kids* as a thank-you gift—the book we’ve been talking about today—we’ll send that to you; and we’ll send you a certificate so that either you and your spouse, or another couple you know, can attend a *Weekend to Remember*® marriage getaway as our guests. That’s because we love our Legacy Partners, and we want to connect with you.

In fact, we’re going to be having a phone call next month, in about two or three weeks, with Legacy Partners. This is just something where Dave and Ann and I get on the phone and do some interaction with Legacy Partners about questions you’ve got about marriage, and family, or ideas you have for our program. It’s just a way to connect with those of you who are highly invested in what we are doing.

If you’d like to become a new Legacy Partner, take advantage of the matching gift that is going on; get the *Laugh and Learn Bible*; get the *Weekend to Remember* gift certificate—go to FamilyLifeToday.com and sign on—say, “I want to become a Legacy Partner”; or call us, and we’ll take care of it by phone. The website is FamilyLifeToday.com. The phone number is 1-800-358-6329—1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

Those of you who are going to join us, as Legacy Partners, thank you, in advance, for
being a part of the team. We are grateful for you, and we appreciate you. We hope to take full advantage of this matching-gift opportunity this week. Pray for us on that, if you will.

Now, tomorrow, we’re going to transition from talking about having little kids at home to talking about when the nest is empty: “What happens after all the kids are gone?” Jill Savage is going to join us to talk about having a full life when the nest is empty. I hope you can join us for that as well.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

FamilyLife Today is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas; a Cru® Ministry. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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