



Gum, Geckos, and God

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Spiegel, James S.,

Gum, geckos, and God : a family's adventure in space, time, and faith /
James S. Spiegel.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-310-28353-9 (softcover)

1. Christianity – Miscellanea. 2. Christian children – Religious life.

I. Title.

BR121.3.S74 2008

230 – dc22

2007049186

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Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

Interior design by Beth Shagene

Printed in the United States of America

08 09 10 11 12 13 • 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

If you can probe the sticky topics of faith and life's meaning with a kid while he probes the sticky recesses of his nasal cavity, then you can discuss theology with anyone. If the truths of God are revealed even in the eyes of a dragonfly or the molting of a gecko, then God's truth is everywhere. And if even a three-year-old child can sense the love of Jesus, then faith is for everyone. These are some of the conclusions I've drawn from my experience so far as a parent.

I once thought that the best place to learn about God is in a classroom or with your nose buried in a book. Those are important contexts for learning, but all of life packs lessons about the divine. Every domain of human experience can serve as the laboratory of faith. It is possible to lose sight of this fact, especially when you have spent a quarter of a century in school and when much

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of your time out of the classroom has been occupied with books.

Soon after receiving my PhD in philosophy from Michigan State University, I landed a full-time teaching position at a small liberal arts college in Indiana. Prior to hearing of this opening, I had never heard of Taylor University and was pleasantly surprised by the warm but academically serious environment there. I soon learned to appreciate the school's emphasis on the integration of faith and learning. Professors are encouraged to share their personal faith inside and outside of the classroom.

From the beginning of my professional career, my academic life and personal life overlapped. Prior to my marriage, I had students at my house regularly. A few guys even became roommates. When I married Amy in the spring of 1998, I knew my interactions with students would change, but I still wanted to take a holistic approach to my vocation. One of the ways Amy contributed to this was by visiting each of my classes once a semester with baked treats. Amy enjoyed meeting my students, and the students enjoyed the cookies or brownies (and meeting Amy). When our kids arrived on the scene, the fun really started. The students loved interacting with the kids, and the kids loved the attention.

My job and my home have continued to intertwine, but as my children have gotten older, an interesting

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thing has happened. While it used to be that my family played a role in my academic life, more and more my work in philosophy and theology has informed my role as a father.

As I've always told my students, great ideas should not just inhabit classrooms; they should permeate our lives. But I never expected that they would find their way into my kids' nightly prayers, be shouted from their sandbox, and become a fixture in our family dinner conversations. I also never knew that topics as wide-ranging as bicycles, gum, and baseball all lead to God. But, as my children have shown me, nothing is too mundane to inspire an inquisitive mind. Without realizing it, my kids have tutored me on how to integrate faith and learning in ways I could never have imagined.

This book might create the impression that my kids are obsessed with issues of faith. That's only because I have condensed here so many of our theological conversations. The truth is that they are pretty balanced kids who spend most of their time riding their bikes, playing in the yard, and building Lego fortresses. However, whenever Amy and I see an opening for some theological discussion, we dive right in. Sometimes we land in the deep well of our kids' hearts, gaining insights into their perspectives on life and God. Other times we hit dry land. This is true of everyone, not just kids. I hope that you walk away from this book seeing that you don't

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have to be an academic to have meaningful conversations about theology.

As one might expect in a project like this, I took the liberty of embellishing dialogue. Our conversations with the kids tend to veer off into random directions so that to transcribe them directly would have made this book a linguistic maze. In at least one instance, I invented an entire dialogue in order to discuss some issues that needed to be addressed. But all of the events described are true, and the conversations are faithful to our kids' personalities and our family dynamic.

Regarding accuracy, my main concern was doctrinal — to be faithful to Scripture, especially where contemporary ideas, both within and outside the church, have strayed from orthodoxy. Most of the “creedal points” — like the existence and nature of God, the virgin birth, and the divinity of Jesus Christ — are discussed, but so are many doctrinally peripheral issues, some of which will highlight the reasonableness of Christianity and some of which are just fun. But all of it, I hope, will encourage readers in the faith.



What Is God Like?

One afternoon I sat in the back yard listening to the Chicago Cubs on the radio and watching my son Bailey dig for unknown treasures in the sandbox. The sky was sunny, the Cubs were leading, and all seemed right with the world. Little did I know that I was about to be thrown a curveball. The curve came not from a Major League pitcher but from somewhere much more challenging—the mouth of my six-year-old: “Dad, what is God like?” With that simple question began an adventure.

I leaned back in my chair, preparing to spout eloquently. “Good question, Bailey,” I said. I had taught philosophy for twenty years, published many books and articles on philosophical topics, and addressed challenging philosophical questions from bright undergrads. But as I searched the mental file for an answer, I realized that never before had I faced such a daunting

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task as answering my son's straightforward query. "Umm . . . That's a *really* good question." The fruit of all of my years of studying and teaching philosophy and theology seemed to evaporate. I had no good answer. "What is God like?" I repeated slowly, making my son's question my own.



One of the best question-askers in history was Socrates. His inspiration came one day when the oracle at Delphi declared him to be the wisest man in Athens. Socrates didn't buy it. He went out to disprove the oracle by randomly interviewing his fellow Athenians to find someone wiser than himself. He did so by asking simple questions: What is knowledge? What is goodness? What is beauty? To his dismay, Socrates discovered that while everyone he interviewed claimed to know the answers to these questions, none of them really did. He was the only one who recognized his own ignorance. Hence came his famous assertion: "All I know is that I know nothing." It is wiser to know you don't know than to think you know when in fact you don't know. So, it seemed, the oracle was correct after all.

Socrates' questions — and his radical idea that there is one almighty God, making Socrates, in his polytheistic culture, appear to be an atheist many times over — angered the city leaders. He was arrested and charged with corrupting the youth and inventing false

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gods. He was convicted and sentenced to death. But he went willingly to his execution — poisoning by hemlock — in hopes that his legacy would inspire others to live virtuously and revere God. For Socrates, philosophy was properly about living, and dying, rightly in God's presence.

Now, nearly twenty-five hundred years after Socrates' death, I and other philosophers pick up his baton, which has been passed from generation to generation. One of the principal tools of my trade is the Socratic question. What is knowledge? What is goodness? What is beauty? When I pose such questions in class, I see students shift uncomfortably in their seats and squeeze their eyes shut for a moment as they struggle for a response. They have never considered such things before. The realization that we don't know as much as we thought we did is just as jarring to us as it was to the ancient Athenians.



“Don't you know, Dad?” Bailey asked, laying aside his shovel and looking up at me expectantly. At six he had yet to learn that there were some answers even Dad didn't know.

“Well . . .” I said at last, “God is sort of like . . . a dad.”

“A dad?” my son echoed skeptically.

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“Yeah,” I said. “Only he’s invisible and much more powerful.”

“Hmm. That’s weird.” With that comment, Bailey went back to digging as if willing to let the conversation drop.

Perhaps I should have let it go, but I refused to be intimidated by a little kid who barely knew how to read. I poised myself and contrived an explanation. “Well, think about it. We came from God, right?”

“Right.”

“And he takes care of us, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“And he loves us and teaches us how to live. Aren’t those the sorts of things that a good dad does?”

“Yeah. But I can *see* you. Why can’t I see God?”

I reached over and turned off the radio. The Cubs would have to win this one on their own. “Does that disappoint you — that God is invisible?”

“Yeah, sort of,” he said timidly.

“Just remember this, Bailey. You are invisible too.”

“What?”

“Your soul, I mean. The part of you that thinks and has feelings is invisible. And my soul is invisible too, isn’t it?”

“I guess . . .” I was sensing some skepticism on his part, but he squinted up at me, willing to at least hear me out.

“Think about it. Do you see my thoughts?”

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“No.”

“Do you see my feelings?”

This elicited a look that spoke volumes as to what Bailey thought of the absurdity of my question, but he only answered with “Nooo,” drawing out the word like he was speaking in slow motion.

“But my thoughts and feelings are real, just like yours are, right?”

“Yeah.” Bailey nodded as he began to comprehend my point. Just then a car rumbled down the street, one of the many mufflerless vehicles that plague our neighborhood.

After glaring appropriately at the offending motorist, I resumed. “Bailey, your soul — it’s also called a spirit — lives in your body. We can see your body, but your soul is invisible. And just because we can’t see your soul, that doesn’t mean it’s not real, does it?”

“Right.”

“It’s the same way with God. He is —”

“The Holy *Spirit!*” Bailey interjected.

“Yes, exactly!” Smart kid. “He’s invisible, but he is very real, with his own thoughts and feelings. And he controls the whole world, even better than we control our own bodies.”

“Whoa.” Bailey looked down at his hands as he pondered this. Palms upward, he slowly clenched and unclenched his fingers, studying their movements. After

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a moment he looked up again. “Can God do anything, Dad?”

“Yes. Well, he can do anything he *wants* to do.”

“Can he make himself not invisible?”

“That’s something he wouldn’t want to do.”

“But *could* he do it if he wanted to?”

“Hmm.” I leaned forward in my chair, studying his earnest face. “I’d have to say no.”

“Why not?”

“Because to do so God would have to make himself not God.”

“Oh.” He dropped his head as if disappointed.

I had answered his question, but not his concern.

“Why do you want God to be visible?”

Bailey looked up at me with plaintive eyes. “So I can hug him when I see him.”

This is one of those moments as a parent when your heart breaks with joy. “Bailey, that is wonderful that you want to hug God. And the good news is that you *can*.”

“How? You said God is always invisible.”

“Yes, but I didn’t say that he can’t put on a body. In fact, he *has* put on a body, one just like ours.”

“Jesus?”

“That’s right.”

“But Dad . . . um . . .”

“Yeah, buddy?”

“Uh . . . how will I know him when I see him?”

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This one made me smile, and Bailey smiled in response. “Oh Bailey, you’ll know him when you see him, I guarantee you that. God will make sure that you can’t miss him.”

“And he’ll let me hug him?”

I nodded. Suddenly all my emotions were in my throat and under my eyelids, so I kept quiet.

Bailey stood up and dusted the sand from his pants. “I think I get it now, Dad.”

“Get what?” I asked.

“How God is like a dad.”

I smiled and pulled my son over for a hug.



Something people notice about Bailey (now eight) is his keen moral-spiritual sensibility. This first became apparent to my wife and me just a few months before Bailey turned three. We had taken him to his first film at the theater, an animated feature titled *Spirit*. In this film there is a lot of gun fighting, and as we drove home afterward, Bailey began to ask questions about guns and how they kill. When we thought we had satiated his curiosity, there was a long silence, then came his stumbling query: “Why . . . we . . . *need* guns?”

This floored me for several reasons. For one thing, I was amazed that this question came from the mouth of a two-year-old. For another, it struck me how this question, like so many others of significance, takes us

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right back to the garden of Eden. But mostly, the force of Bailey's question had to do with a realization I had recently come to, through another film, *Life Is Beautiful*, and my reading of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy.

In Benigni's film, set in Italy during the Second World War, a Jewish father works diligently to shield his son from the genocidal evil unfolding all around them. He succeeds in doing so, through comedic ploys, all the way through their internment in a concentration camp. The night I watched that film, I cried myself to sleep. It obviously hit me hard emotionally, but the reason for this was not clear to me at the time. During this period, I was also reading Tolkien's books, and I occasionally found myself in tears with his descriptions of the Black Riders, who hotly pursue Frodo and his loyal company of friends. As with the film, I wasn't quite sure why I was so moved by the narrative. I rarely cry watching films, and I had never done so reading a book. But now, all of a sudden, I was a flood of tears! Why? The answer came to me that night in the car, driving home from the film, discussing the subject of guns with Bailey. Again I began to cry, but now I knew why. Bailey's simple query showed me plainly something that the Benigni film and Tolkien's books communicated to me only subconsciously: no matter how hard I try, I cannot completely shelter my child from evil in this world.

My son is sure to encounter deep hatred and even cruelty, through no fault of his own. It is also certain

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that he will himself become entangled in sin to some degree, since the same poison lurks within us all. On top of this — if Tolkien and the apostle Paul are correct — there are unspeakably evil entities, the *real* Black Riders, that already hate Bailey, though he has done nothing to provoke them. And they are intent on enticing him to become an agent of evil as they are.

With this realization I resolved to emphasize my kids' moral-spiritual training above all else. Nothing can compare to the importance of training my kids to be wise — to understand God and his ways and to live accordingly. The more they can learn about God, the more prepared they'll be to face life's temptations and to outrun the Black Riders who hatefully pursue them. I also glimpsed, all at once, that the greatest practical value of my vocation as a Christian philosopher is how it equips me for this daunting task.

During all of my years in graduate school, never once did I consider how my training in philosophy — the study of wisdom — would enable me to be a better parent. Now I think about it every day.



I love being a parent, but some aspects of the job — and it *is* a job — are truly insufferable. Take dressing the kids, for example. Now that is something I really loathe. I'm normally a patient person, whether it's waiting in line or listening to a tiresome person drone on about his

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job. But nothing tests my patience like putting clothes on a little kid. Man, it gets me uptight just writing about it. I think it's a combination of two factors that make it so hard for me. There's the sheer tedium of the task itself—first this sock, not this way, but that; no, wait, it's upside down. Okay, now, pull—hard enough to get it over that pudgy foot but not so hard that the knee bends and you lose all leverage. All right, good, that one is on correctly. Okay, now the other sock . . . And so on. Seemingly endlessly. The same dull tasks, over and over and over and ridiculously over again—like Sisyphus and his boulder.¹ It seems you just manage to reach the top of the hill, getting your child fully clothed and ready to face the day, when the proverbial boulder rolls down the hill and he spills juice down the front and you have to start pushing all over again.

The resistance that you get from the child as he grows impatient with the process is also nearly unbearable. You're trying your best to patiently put clothes on this squirming kid, and he's losing *his* patience because you're not dressing him quickly enough. The next thing you know, he's moaning and crying, and you want to throw his shoe across the room. But somehow you manage to calmly put it on his foot and successfully tie it. Ah, another small but hard-won victory.

Considering my experiences as a parent, the daily reminders that God is my Father are very humbling. To shield my pride, I sometimes tell myself, "At least

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he doesn't have to put up with as much whining from me every day as I deal with from my kids." Then it occurs to me that God witnesses not only my spoken complaints but also my private grumblings. A passing thought of resentment about some aspect of my life registers in the divine ear like nails on a chalkboard. And my "private" attitudes of pride and condemning judgments of my neighbors might as well be screaming profanity, as far as the all-perceiving Mind is concerned. These realizations can make you feel pretty immature from a moral standpoint.

But then these darker moments are more than made up for by the seizures of grace that come with parenting. To have a child is to experience a genuinely unique kind of love. People tell you this before you have kids, and you believe them — or you affirm what they are saying in an abstract way — but you really don't understand. I have loved others in all sorts of relational contexts — love of my parents, siblings, extended family, friends, and romantic interests. My love for my wife topped them all. We are wedded soul-to-soul, and I can't imagine having a better life partner. Some of these affections have been more or less natural, but none of these loves has been completely selfless. In fact, for the longest time I had no idea that this was even a possibility for me or any other mortal in this world. Then I had a child of my own.

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Before becoming a parent, I used to hear people talk of how readily they would die for their kids. And I would think to myself, “Wow, that’s heroic. To give your life for your child — what a noble thing. I don’t know if I could ever do that for someone, even if it was my own child.” These thoughts seem silly to me now. They reflect a mind that knew nothing of the relational universe in which I now dwell. Every normal and healthy-minded parent knows full well that giving your life for your child, if one had to make such a decision, would not be particularly noble, because no decision would be necessary. The response of self-sacrifice for your own child would be automatic, like blinking or breathing.

In this sense, parental love is its own category of love. In fact, sometimes to me the word *love* seems too soft or gentile, lacking a certain sense of primal compulsion. It’s more like a force of nature, an energy that grips you and binds you to your child so relentlessly that you feel at times almost like an automaton or a mindless servant. But, of course, it is no mere force either, because the affection is so deep and resilient. Combine those features and you have, well, parental love, a power so strong that it can compel even the most ordinary person to die for his kids . . . or even to help them to put on their socks.



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What is God like? Perhaps the reason Bailey's question stumped me initially is because, aside from parents, there are very few things in this world to which God can be compared. As our cosmic parent, he nurtures us continually. And as powerful as parental love is, this is a mere reflection of the one who *is* love.

What awe can be prompted by a six-year-old goofing around in a sandbox. But six-year-olds become seven-year-olds. Their questions multiply, as do the wonders they reveal. Then their little siblings get into the action, and before you know it you're tackling life's biggest questions left and right when all you really want to do is just relax and listen to the Cubs game. Little did I realize what theological realms my kids would lead me into. The conversation was just beginning.