

Time for God: Devotions for children

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [September 11, 2002](#) issue

Besides being colleagues at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Susan R. Garrett and Amy Plantinga Pauw are friends and the mothers of young children. Recently the two scholars—Garrett teaches New Testament and Pauw teaches theology—collaborated on an unusual book, one informed by their knowledge of scripture and theology but inspired by the needs of their children: [Making Time for God: Daily Devotions for Children and Families to Share](#). The book will be published in October by Baker Books. I talked with them about the project and about their own efforts to instill Christian faith in their children.

Who are you aiming to reach in *Making Time for God*?

Amy Pauw: Our book is aimed at children roughly seven to 12. It's organized as a daybook, which means that there's an entry for every day of the year. Each entry contains a passage from scripture, a short meditation and a prayer. The calendar structure allows us to include both liturgical emphases—attention to Lent and Advent, for example—and themes in the secular calendar, such as women's history month, African-American history month, the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving.

Clearly this book is a departure from your scholarly interests. Can you say a bit about those interests?

Susan Garrett: I've published books on the Synoptic Gospels—one on Mark and one on Luke, as well as a number of articles on Paul and on Revelation. Right now I'm writing a book on angels, *No Ordinary Angel: Jesus and the Angels in the Bible and Today*. I'm interested both in ancient angelology and in modern pop angelology. The book will be both historical and theological, looking at how early angelology influenced Jesus. It's also a kind of cultural critique, examining popular spirituality and trying to understand how it resembles and how it differs from ancient views.

Pauw: I've focused a lot on the work of Jonathan Edwards. I've edited a volume of his writings and written a book about him—*The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. I've also explored the connection between

Christian practices and theological reflection. Right now my project is a book on ecclesiology, on the church as a community of practice.

Susan and I are in different fields, fields that often don't have a lot of connection with each other at professional meetings and in collaborative groups and so on. Part of the fun and challenge of our book for children was that it allowed us to work across disciplines. That's helped me become a better biblical exegete, and it's helped Sue to become a better theologian.

How did the book for children get started?

Garrett: I was trying to find appropriate devotional materials to read with my daughter, who was seven years old at the time, and was unable to find anything that satisfied us. And then I got the idea that maybe I should try to write a book that would suit us and other families as well. I realized that I couldn't do it by myself. I needed Amy's help, and I called her up. Although she protested initially, she actually said yes right then and there on the telephone.

Although we've never collaborated before on any scholarly work, we have numerous regular interactions as colleagues and as mothers of children who are friends with each other. My daughters are 11 and six, and Amy's are 13, 11 and eight.

What was wrong with the existing literature?

Garrett: We weren't able to find anything that treated the biblical text in a substantive and responsible way, but that was still interesting and comprehensible to kids. Kids of this age need something that engages them.

My daughter vetoed a number of the books that we tried early on because she felt they were—though she didn't use this word—too moralizing. They always had a neat little moral lesson that she was supposed to absorb. Others just bored her.

We tried hard to make ours a book that will hold children's and adults' interest, that's sufficiently varied and unpredictable. We hope that it will keep people looking forward to that next entry.

Pauw: I'm also not very happy with the theology in a lot of children's devotional materials. Children ask hard questions about theological topics like sin, hope and divine providence, and they deserve more than trite, simplistic answers.

Garrett: We're trying to expose kids to the full range of the canon—not just the 23rd psalm, the Gospels and the story of Noah's ark. We want to help children see the wealth and variety of scripture.

Pauw: Let me give an example of the kind of theology that goes with this approach. I wrote some entries on the psalms of lament, psalms in which faith is expressed in a way that doesn't lead to easy answers or a quick solution. It's a faith that expresses doubt and anger and despair. I think that children need to see a broad range of faith responses to God. In our entries we try to encourage children to think hard about their faith, to ask questions and to realize that sometimes the answers are not clear-cut. Sometimes being a Christian is hard. But we have a rich tradition that has a lot of resources to offer. The daybook format gave us 366 chances (we wrote it for a leap year) to show the breadth of the Bible, to present some of the different voices in scripture. One of our many goals for the book is to encourage biblical literacy.

My children not only need practice in learning what's in the Bible, but also in connecting it to the things they wonder about. Children between seven and 12 watch the news or listen to the radio. Questions about death and evil come up. I want to give them the sense that the Christian faith brings centuries of reflection and wisdom to draw from when confronted with all sorts of problems and issues.

We treat faith as an attitude of trust and commitment that is strong enough to permit asking hard questions about God and about life. While we avoid narrowly doctrinal concepts of faith, we do see our message as in keeping with the best of evangelical tradition—"evangelical" in the root sense of the word, of proclaiming boldly the central place of Jesus Christ in the life of faith.

Garrett: We thought about the range of things that kids have to cope with in life and decided that we wanted to treat issues like dealing with grief or loss, as well as positive things like faith, friendship and care for the earth and joyful family times. We have entries about divorce and even one that mentions alcoholism. We wanted to give kids some sort of framework to help them make sense of and negotiate both the smooth and the rocky paths of life.

What part did your children play in the project?

Garrett: They were our frankest critics, as you can imagine. We would bring home drafts of entries and get very candid feedback about which ones they liked and which ones didn't make sense.

So we did involve them quite directly in the writing project, and they are all very excited about the book.

This is probably not the kind of work that gets you ahead in your field.

Garrett: It depends on how you define “getting ahead.” Amy and I both feel that the work we’ve done has significantly expanded and changed the way we view all of our work. She mentioned that she now feels more confident working with the biblical text, and I certainly feel more confident about speaking as a theologian rather than as a more narrowly constrained historical critic when I deal with the scriptures. We think that having worked on this project is going to have a significant impact on all of our writing and research.

Pauw: It’s made us realize how complex and specialized our writing has been. That was the way we were trained and encouraged to write. But I think doing our children’s book has opened us up and given us a new interest in writing across disciplines and for broader audiences.

What other kinds of resources do you see children as needing?

Garrett: We’re very committed to raising our children and other children in the faith—that means helping them learn how to read the Bible and how to pray. Those are both complex, daunting tasks. The Bible is a difficult book to read. Learning how to pray is hard. We want to introduce children to both of those disciplines and to give them a sense of how they fit together. By structuring our book as a daybook we hope to encourage a daily discipline.

Pauw: It’s a matter not just of knowing how to read the Bible but of having some real familiarity with the major stories and witnesses within it. That takes time. Similarly, learning to pray requires lots of practice—bringing our lives before God day after day.

Garrett: Implicit in what Amy said and also implied in the subtitle of our book is the importance of parents’ modeling of these practices both for and with their children. While this is a book that some of the older children in our target age range could read by themselves, we hope that it’s one parents will read with their children so that the entries can be springboards to family discussions about matters of faith.

Pauw: If they are given a little encouragement, children will naturally become great askers of theological questions. They are seeing many things for the first time, and

they wonder why the world is arranged as it is, why things happen the way they do. Sue and I hope that our book will give help and confidence to parents, grandparents, and all who spend time with children as they strive to nurture kids' theological curiosity and emerging faith.