

On Family Worship

By Rev Sean McCann

One of the more formative experiences of my early years as a Christian happened in a hunting cabin in the backwoods of the South Carolina piedmont. It happened just a few years after my conversion when I befriended a young man who was a southern gentleman, and a Presbyterian to boot. As the son of a suburban, academic family, I knew nothing of this genteel world of carbines and catechisms, but I loved my friend and jumped at the invitation to join him for a hunting weekend at his family cabin. Everything about that trip was foreign to me – shooting skeet, standing when women entered the room, discussing Noah and the Ark at the dinner table, etc. – but nothing quite prepared me for what happened during breakfast the next day.

As we were sleepily hunched over our bowls of Cheerios, my friend's father proceeded to sit down at the table with us, take out his Bible, and read it...out loud! I was shocked and in my drowsy state wondered if I was still dreaming. I had never heard of such a thing. Was not the Bible for church and personal quiet times? What was he doing interrupting our meal? Was this some sort of hunting initiation rite? Was I being pranked? Where were cameras hidden somewhere? Just as my social anxiety was about at its limit, he finished reading and began to explain what the verses meant. Before I could get over this shock, he actually started asking us questions! And then, just as suddenly as this bizarre ritual had begun, he prayed and it was over; we were on our way out the door and deep into the woods.

That day I shot my first (and only) deer, and the excitement of the hunt overshadowed the strange breakfast ritual. I soon wrote it off as another odd practice of those southern Presbyterians and never really thought about it again – that is, until I started thinking about my own family. This pamphlet then is one part personal journey and another part pastoral exhortation on the ritual of family worship. I am convinced that for parents, gathering regularly for family devotions is one of the most important patterns that you can establish for the spiritual health and growth of your family. Since that fateful morning at the breakfast table, I have learned that family worship is far from a southern Presbyterian practice, but rather has ancient roots and a liturgy established in the Old Testament. It is not a peculiar cultural expression, but rather an historic and God-honoring practice that predates, and will surely outlast, all of our modern Western inventions for spiritual discipleship and formation.

We would do well to study the ancient paths of our forefathers and mothers in the faith, and follow where they have trod in trusting God's ways in leading our families. In the following pages I attempt to explore that path by looking at four aspects of family worship: the blessings, basis, basics, and books of family worship. May these pages challenge, encourage, and bless you as you hope and pray for the seeds that you have sown to take root in good soil to grow up to multiply and bear much fruit.

The Blessing of Family Worship: One Family's Journey

Soon after Lindsey and I were married I was reintroduced to the discipline of family worship. The idea of gathering as a family to worship God was, for someone who had never heard of such a thing, a fairly awkward proposition. But like any good, newly Reformed and eager young husband, I set out to write a detailed worship liturgy for our family time: multiple hymns,

catechism memorization, alternating days of reciting the commandments and creeds, bible passages from various genres, multiple prayers, devotional readings, etc. My wife greeted this new idea with raised eyebrows, but with her trademark good-natured support we plunged ahead with our marathon family worship gatherings (made to feel all the longer by my utter inability to carry a tune!) I think we started on a Monday, and by Thursday we were burned out and the plan was lost in the sheer business of life.

When kids started rolling along a couple years later, I heard the wise words of a father a few years my senior: “Blessed is the father (or mother) who starts family worship *again*.” What sweet words of life for me – a father – who had neglected this wonderful blessing. Now, many years (and kids) later, I still need to hear the encouragement and gentle rebuke of this wise beatitude. As kids are crying and milk is flying around the breakfast table and all I want to do is get to my study, the Lord often reminds me of the great blessing to me and my family that is family worship.

These days we have scrapped the original liturgy for a much simpler one – read, pray, and sing. And friends I write to tell you that these five to ten minutes each morning, though hectic and disjointed, have blessed my family and me more than anything else in our daily routine. I can truly say that what began as a duty (and still feels like that some days), has become a delight that we all depend upon and look forward to each morning. And what amazes me the most is that it has so little to do with me – it is nothing less than the mercy of God breaking into the mess of life.

Of all the godly examples you have in parenting and raising a family, I am certainly not near the top of the list, but maybe my failures and struggles will encourage you to see that God’s grace is enough for even the weakest of parents. There is much to say on this precious and neglected topic, but for now, hear again these wonderful words: “Blessed are you as you start family worship...*again*.”

The Basis for Family Worship

One morning, over the chaos of the breakfast meal, I was attempting to lead our family in worship around the table. As one child after another interrupted me, and as someone’s milk spilled for the umpteenth time, I locked eyes with my wife and we immediately had the same thought: “Why in the world are we doing this?”

Most of us have a good understanding of why we read and pray alone every day, and most of us do not need to be educated on why we worship together as a church every Lord’s Day, but many of us need constant reminders of the Biblical basis for family worship. Unlike private and corporate worship, family worship presents unique challenges and can often be the most difficult of the three to develop into a habit.

So why do we as families seek to worship together? The answer lies in one of the key text in the Old Testament called the Shemah (*shema* is the Hebrew word for *hear* or *listen*). After Moses recounted the Ten Commandments, he summarized the law in Deuteronomy 6:4-7:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

The directness of these verses arrests us. God calls Israel to listen, and then gives them the bedrock truth of the faith: God is one, and we must love him.

For those parents considering the reasons for and values of family worship, this text lays down two responsibilities. The first responsibility is to store up this great commandment in our own heart (v6). Just a few chapters earlier Moses warned the people to “take care” and “keep your soul diligently.” That means that the most important job we have as parents is not to teach our children the gospel, but first to believe the gospel ourselves. We must teach our children something that we have first experienced and known in our own heart. It is a dangerous practice to tell our children things about God without exhibiting a true love for God. This disconnect between our words and our lives will, at best, lead to a lukewarm faith on their part; at worst it will lead to outright hypocrisy.

Have you ever noticed how quickly children pickup on the passions of their parents? Whether it is a sports team, or outdoor activity, or cooking, or singing – our kids seem to love the things that we love. If worship is nothing but a joyless duty for us, we should not be surprised when our children feel the same way. They are not only listening to our words, but also watching our lives.

The second parental responsibility, after believing these words of life, is to teach them to our children. We must be diligent to store them up in our own hearts, and then diligently teach them to our children. Those of you who have flown on a plane with your children will remember the clear instructions on what to do if the oxygen masks drop down above your seat in an emergency. You must first put the mask on your self, and then assist your child. It is the same with passing on the gospel to the next generation: it is only after you have tasted and seen that the Lord is good that you are able to lead your children to drink deeply from that same stream of living water.

A key word in this verse is “diligently.” Parents are called to be diligent in how we teach our children. How diligent? The verse goes on to use two contrasts to illustrate the all-pervasive nature of this task: sit in your house/walk by the way, and lay down/rise. This means that as you sit and walk, and as you lie down and rise, you are teaching your children something. Children are always observing and learning something from their parents, so what are they learning from you? What do both your words and your life teach your children? In *The Family Worship Book*, Dr. Terry Johnson writes: “Spiritually nourished parents make for better families.” The word of God is spiritual nourishment to our soul, and we pass that nourishment down to our children.

These verses describe the task of teaching our children as *heart-felt diligence*, and I can think of no better description of the daily task of gathering together as a family for worship. If parents are only *heart-felt* in our teaching then we risk missing many opportunities and looking back and

wondering where the time has gone. On the flip side, if parents are only *diligent* then we risk raising empty legalist who cannot wait to get out of our homes and out of our churches.

So back to the chaotic breakfast table – why are we doing this again? Our words, our instructions, our examples cannot change our children’s hearts – God alone can change a sinner’s heart. So in faith we speak God’s words, we pray in Christ’s name, and we sing to God’s glory with heart-felt diligence, all the while trusting in God’s promises and trusting in his Spirit to work in powerful ways, both in our own hearts, and in the hearts of our children.

The Basics of Family Worship

So you have gathered the family together for family worship – maybe it is just you and your spouse, maybe you have herded all the kids together and finally quieted them down after breakfast or dinner, maybe you even have some guests at your table – now what do you do? How will you spend the next few minutes together in worship? I confess – and I know I am not alone here – this can often begin as an awkward time. Not every family is eager and ready to openly discuss spiritual things. Many fathers and mothers feel inadequate to lead and teach their family. Often families try to start this practice later in life and it feels forced or inauthentic, at least at first. Sometimes husbands and wives are not on the same page and it creates tension as one parent tries to focus the children while the other refuses to help. Organizing your family for worship can be daunting, but it does not have to be. Let me propose just three elements that I hope will lead to a rich, simple, and God-honoring practice of family worship.

Read: Reading and teaching God’s word is the first and simplest step, and yet it is often the most intimidating. We fear that we will not have the right answers to our kids’ questions, or that they will get bored with the same old Bible stories. But instead of jumping through hoops and exhausting ourselves trying to find the perfect devotional or all the right answers, we just need to devote ourselves to the very thing the Lord has promised to use in the lives of his people. Just as Paul instructs Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture in the worship of the church (1 Tim 4:13), so too is the family to be devoted to the reading of Scripture in their worship. You may choose to use some devotional material or topical study to help spark questions and discussion, but always include reading a passage of God’s word, for it is the word and the word alone that is “living and active, sharper than any two edged sword.” (Heb 4:12)

Pray: In our services of public worship we have a number of different prayers (invocation, confession, intercession, benediction, etc.) It may be your desire to include different prayers around your table, or simply to include different aspects into one prayer. Either way, prayer is a vital part of our worship as we praise God, confess our sins, thank him for his grace, and intercede on behalf of one another. It can be helpful during this time to pray for upcoming events in the lives of family members, as well as any pressing requests or concerns from friends or church members. In our family we sometimes include prayers for our missionary friends around the world. This is also a great time to introduce children to the Lord’s Prayer as they can easily memorize it at a young age.

Sing: James Montgomery Boice and Paul Jones wrote a number of modern hymns under the title *Hymns for a Modern Reformation*. Jones wrote that the goal of these hymns was “to teach the

Bible in a meaningful, memorable, and life-changing manner.”¹ The great reformer Martin Luther wrote: “Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions which control men or more often overwhelm them.”² Singing – even with a just a few off-key voices gathered around a messy table – is a memorable way in which the Bible is taught and our emotions are joined with the great doctrines of our faith. Most parents instinctively start singing to their children from the day they are born, so why not add psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to the playlist? Admittedly, singing can be awkward. A husband and a wife singing together for the first time can certainly feel forced, while a tone-deaf father is not easy to overcome (just ask my wife and kids!), but the awkwardness fades away over time and is replaced with the self-forgetful joy of worship. For children familiarity and repetition is a key to learning, so pick some family-favorite hymns and learn some more to build up your repertoire. The church bulletin is a helpful guide here as you can begin to practice during the week some of the hymns to be sung on Sunday.

That’s it! Read, pray, and sing. Once you get the basics down, you may want to add some confessions of faith (Apostle’s Creed, Children’s and Shorter Catechism, etc.) or scripture memory (Ten Commandments, Beatitudes, etc.), but there’s no need to get too fancy. Dr. Johnson assures us that this pattern is more than enough: “By using these elements in daily family worship you will be providing regular spiritual instruction for your family as well as preparing them for the public worship services of the church.”³

The Books of Family Worship

To start the practice of family worship all you really need is your Bible. With it you can include the three basic elements (read, pray, sing), even if you only sing the same few songs over and over again! However, if you want to expand your practice or vary it up a bit, let me suggest some other resources that might be helpful.

The best book I know of to help get started in family worship (beside the Bible) is *The Family Worship Book: A Resource for Family Devotions* by Terry Johnson. In addition to a great overview of family worship, the book includes a Bible reading plan, the Children’s Catechism, and a list of 50 verses to memorize, as well as a list and schedule for learning and singing new psalms and hymns. If you are interested in a lengthier introduction to the practice of family worship I would also recommend *A Neglected Grace: Family Worship in the Christian Home* by Jason Helopoulos and *Family Worship* by Joel Beeke.

Resources for Reading

The place to start reading God’s word is, well, in God’s word. There is no substitute for reading the Bible itself, and though you may want to supplement this with age-appropriate Bibles, never underestimate the power of God’s simple and unadorned word. If you are interested in doing a topical study, Sinclair Ferguson has written two great children’s books: *The Big Book of Questions and Answers* and *The Big Book of Questions and Answers about Jesus*. Another author

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III, ed., *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 233.

² *Ibid*, 231.

³ Terry L. Johnson, *The Family Worship Book: A Resource Book for Family Devotions* (Fearn, Great Brittan: Christian Focus Publications, 2012), 21.

that we have come to appreciate lately is Marty Machowski, who has some great books like *Wise Up* and *Listen Up* (devotions on Proverbs and the parables), and *Prepare Him Room* on the advent of Christ. For those looking for an aid in understanding and applying what they read, Joel Beeke has published the *Family Worship Bible Guide*, which presents rich devotional thoughts on all 1,189 chapters in the Bible.

You also may want to take time to read and study some of the great confessions of the faith. Our red *Trinity Hymnal* has many of these resources printed in the back, including the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, the Westminster Confession of Faith, as well as the Shorter Catechism. If you wish to go deeper in this area, Starr Mead has written a great book entitled *Training Hearts, Teaching Minds: Family Devotions Based on the Shorter Catechism*, as well as *Comforting Hearts, Teaching Minds: Family Devotions Based on the Heidelberg Catechism*.

Resources for Praying

We often don't think of needing resources for prayer as most of us are more comfortable praying extemporaneously (without forms or notes), but there are more resources than you might think to help you in your family worship prayers. I have always found the ACTS acronym helpful in structuring my prayers (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication), and of course the Lord's Prayer is our model. In *Family Worship*, Dr. Johnsons lists a number of Bible passages to help us in different types of prayer. Other great resources include the *Valley of Vision* published by The Banner of Truth, the *Book of Common Prayer*, and Matthew Henry's *A Method for Prayer*.

In addition to praying scriptural based prayers, let me suggest two more aids to help you plan who to pray for: missionary prayer cards and the church directory. Prayer cards are great to put on your fridge and remember your missionaries, but they are even better when used to help us pray. We keep a small stack of missionary prayer cards on hand and try to pray for them regularly. Check our church website for a list of all of our church supported missionaries and you can find their prayer cards in our foyer. The second resource for prayer is a church directory, which you already have in your home. Consider moving it next to your Bible and commit to pray for one family, or one letter of the alphabet, or one page in the directory, everyday.

Resources for Singing

As I wrote above, the *Trinity Hymnal* is the best resource for singing. Keep a running list of your favorite hymns, as well as those you'd like to learn. In our house each child is assigned a day of the week to pick which hymn they would like to sing. You could also use the "With Heart and Voice" collection of newer hymns that we have in our pews, or save some of the inserts we regularly use from the psalter to sing at home. If you are interested in the history of our hymns, Robert Morgan has written a very helpful book called *Then Sings My Soul: 150 of the World's Greatest Hymn Stories*.

One final resource that covers all the above categories is the "Sunday Reminders" email that comes out from the church office. Every Friday this email goes out and includes the preaching texts for the coming Sunday sermons, as well as the readings and all the hymn selections. Use this to prepare your heart and your family for the word and song, as well as a guide to pray for the ministry of the church and the proclamation of God's word.

I hope you find this list helpful. I am sure many of you have other resources you use that I have not mentioned, and if you have a chance I would love to hear about them as well. At the end of the day though it is not about the books or resources, family worship is about how the “family should assemble to offer God its praise, to hear His word, to give thanks for His mercies.”⁴

A Final Note

Dr. Johnson writes of the cumulative effect of growing up in a home with loving parents who regularly practice family worship:

Think in terms of the long view. What is the cumulative impact of just fifteen minutes of this each day, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, for eighteen years? At the rate of six days a week (excluding Sunday), one spends an hour and a half a week in family worship (about the length of a home Bible study), seventy-eight hours a year (about the length of two weekend retreats), and 1,404 hours over the course of eighteen years (about the length of eight week-long summer camps). When you establish your priorities, think in terms of the cumulative effect of this upon your children. Think of the cumulative effect of this upon you, after forty or sixty or eighty years of daily family worship. All this, without having to drive anywhere.

I have found over time that the greatest benefit of family worship has been to keep the Lord in the forefront of our days. No matter our hectic schedules or seasons of life, we try to regularly make time to gather for a few minutes to hear from God and respond to his mercy and grace. These brief daily gatherings are not the sum total of our family’s spiritual life – we certainly pray and look for moments of conversation and open doors to speak into the hearts of our children – but they do lay a foundation for spiritual life and devotion to God. And remember, “Blessed is the family who starts family worship *again*.”

⁴ Terry L. Johnson, *The Family Worship Book: A Resource Book for Family Devotions* (Fearn, Great Brittan: Christian Focus Publications, 2012), 17.