

CHRIST AT HOME:
ADDRESSING THE NEED FOR FAMILY DEVOTIONS

by

Michael W. Koepke

A Senior Thesis Submitted to
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Master of Divinity degree

Professor James F. Korthals, Advisor

Approved at Mequon, Wisconsin, on 27 March 2012



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Abstract

This paper addresses the lack of devotional activity among today's Christian families and seeks to give pastors and parents the motivation and direction needed to implement home devotions in the family. After considering influences at work to lead family members away from the faith, this paper demonstrates God's plan throughout Scripture that parents, not organizations, must address this issue by taking responsibility for the spiritual training of their children. Scripture records sad examples of the consequences that result when parents fail in this capacity. Factors influencing religious transmission from parent to child indicate that parents who engage in religious training and discussion at home are more likely to pass their faith on to their children than parents who do not. Other blessings to be anticipated by families who implement home devotions are also highlighted. Obstacles that may prevent families from beginning a devotional routine are addressed and answered, and practical guidelines and suggestions are given to help the family get started. In the appendices, age-specific ideas for spiritual training are given, devotionals are reviewed and recommended to help families select appropriate materials, and a sample of a weekly devotional series based off of the lectionary is offered.

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Introduction

“Now what?” the young pastor wonders. Eight years of study for the pastoral ministry have finally been completed, and the Holy Spirit in his grace has seen fit to call him into the public ministry of the gospel. The graduation ceremony and celebration have come and gone, the moving van has been unpacked, and the verses that were spoken over him at his installation are still ringing in his ears. Now it is Monday morning, the first day of, God-willing, a long and blessed ministry. “Now what?” he wonders.

There is, of course, no shortage of things to do. He must begin next week’s sermon, plan Bible studies and worship services, and meet new people. Yet the question still remains. “Now what? What is it that the Lord would have his pastor do in this place? What noble purpose lies behind the sermons and the Bible studies and the worship services and getting to know this congregation?”

It is a great question to ask, and one that he who calls pastors into the public ministry answers through the apostle Paul: “It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, *to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.*”¹

These verses deserve the pastor’s utmost attention. For it is here that Christ spells out one of his purposes for instituting the pastoral office in the first place. It is “to equip the saints for ministry-work, with the goal that Christ’s body be built up.” The NIV translation “works of service” is not bad, but it fails to specify the type of service God has in mind. *Διακονία* can simply mean the humble service performed by a servant in a household or at a meal. But serving physical needs cannot be all that God has in mind for his saints here. The goal (εἰς) of this service that God’s people are to perform is the building up of Christ’s body, the body of believers! This service must then not only include physical serving, but also spiritual serving, since the body of Christ is a spiritual entity. This is not to say that the body of Christ cannot be assisted through physical service at all. In Acts 6 it is clear that the men whom the apostles chose to “wait on tables” were assisting the church through their physical service. Works of physical service that believers perform in their vocations or in their day-to-day lives certainly “make the teaching

¹ Ephesians 4:11,12 (NIV). The Greek for the italicized phrase is as follows: *πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας, εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ.*

about God our Savior attractive.”² However, physical serving in and of itself cannot build up the body of Christ. Only spiritual serving can do that. Paul goes on to say in Ephesians chapter 4: “Instead, *speaking the truth* in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. *From him the whole body*, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, *grows and builds itself up* in love, as each part does its work.”³ Speaking the truth that comes from Christ is the only way growth is achieved in the body of Christ. This is *spiritual* serving that God wants all of his people to be engaged in, not just pastors. In fact, as Paul says, for this reason the pastoral ministry was instituted – to equip God’s people, that is, to make them well-suited and well-prepared, so that they too can perform spiritual service.

This shapes the way a pastor views his work. He will still preach sermons. He will still teach Bible classes. He will still visit people and counsel them. He will still do the work of an evangelist. But as he does these things, he remembers that he is not merely an actor on a stage or an employee whose primary purpose is to work and perform for God’s people. He is not feeding people with God’s Word simply so that they have the spiritual nourishment to survive until the next time he is able to feed them with the Word. If that were the case, the body of Christ would certainly starve to death! One man could not possibly provide all the spiritual nourishment necessary for an entire congregation. Even Christ himself knew that he could not do everything alone, and so he equipped disciples to help him. Likewise, the pastor does not merely *perform*, he *prepares*. He *equips*. He helps his people get to a place where they too can serve each other’s spiritual needs and work alongside him to build up the body of Christ.

How, then, can the pastor equip his people to perform this work? With what should the pastor equip his people to enable them to serve the spiritual needs of others? God answers that question clearly through Paul in 2 Timothy chapter 3: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”⁴ Simply put, the pastor must equip his people to use the same tool he uses – the Word of God. For without God’s Word, the body of Christ will shrivel up and die. As August Pieper says:

² Titus 2:10

³ Ephesians 4:15,16

⁴ 2 Timothy 3:16,17

Every individual part of the spiritual life of the Church must derive from the Word. There it is really to be found. It is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, Romans 1; it is spirit and life, John 6; a fire and a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces, Jeremiah 23; quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart, Hebrews 4. The Word, the Gospel, is not a dead writing locked up in letters of the alphabet, or human speech which dies away on the wind, but it is the speaking of God Himself; that is why it never, never, not even once, returns unto God void without accomplishing its purpose, when it has been heard, read, understood, and perceived, but "as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater; so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isa. 55) Such a living, effective, fiery power is the Word of God, that no one can hear or read it even once (provided he has understood it), without experiencing its divine converting, sanctifying power.⁵

This Word is ultimately the only tool we have to build up the body of Christ. It stands to reason, then, that if God wants his pastors to equip his people so that they too can build up the body of Christ, those pastors must prepare people so that they can use the Word themselves. Certainly this task is being accomplished through sermons and Bible classes and other forums where the pastor brings God's Word to bear on his people, for the people must first be built up by the Word before they can use it to build others up in turn. The people will doubtless then take the Word that has been given them by their pastor and comfort others with the comfort they themselves have received from God. However, since equipping God's people to use the Word is an explicit purpose of the pastoral ministry,⁶ should the pastor not also make explicit efforts to accomplish that goal? Should the pastor not spend time explicitly encouraging and teaching his people to put that Word to use in their own lives as well? Steven Degner writes:

God has charged every pastor with the responsibility of feeding His flock and equipping His saints for the work of the ministry. The pastor who sees the flock of God feeding only from his hand is missing an important part of his work. The Lord has called him to help people feed themselves from the Word and grow in grace within the walls of their own homes, not just within the walls of the church.⁷

⁵ August Pieper, "The True Reconstruction of the Church," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 62, no.2 (April 1965): 87-88.

⁶ As demonstrated from Ephesians 4:11,12

⁷ Steven Degner, "Encouraging Christian Education in the Home" (WLS Essay File, 1978): 9.

Although the pastor will seek to equip his people to use the Word in the many different places and circumstances of life, in this essay I will focus on one place and circumstance that seems to be the most natural – at home among the members of one’s family. It is in the home that God’s people have the most frequent and consistent opportunities to build up the body of Christ with his Word, and it is among the members of one’s family that God’s people would likely feel the most natural doing so. Since the family is the basic unit of society that God established, the time the pastor spends to encourage his people to make use of the Word among their families is time that could hardly be better spent. Richard Gurgel writes:

Next to the effort that goes into making our public worship the best it can be in liturgy and proclamation, there is no task in the church today worth more of our prime time and efforts than the task of reforming the Christian home to be once again the greenhouse of the faith under the bright light of the Word.⁸

If the pastor resolves to foster family devotions in the homes of his members, he will soon find out that this task will require a great deal of time and effort. There is a reason that Gurgel used the word “reform” to describe what needs to happen if homes are “to be once again the greenhouse of faith under the bright light of the Word.” Sadly, Christian families that conduct regular devotions in their homes are rare. Lest we entertain the notion that this is an issue which has only plagued Christian homes in recent times, we note the assessment of August Pieper in 1919:

In our Christian homes there is and remains very little of God’s Word, hardly even the regular family worship with Scripture reading and prayer every morning and every evening. Yes, in some Christian homes there is no common prayer at all any more, neither spoken by the father, nor by the mother, nor by the children, particularly in such homes in which the children do not attend a Christian school. Even the table prayers have been discontinued in some families. The Bible is seldom or never opened. Only the grandmother still prays with her hymnal; all the rest either leave the hymnal at church, or they put it away immediately after the church services until the following Sunday; it only serves in the regular church service. —Is it not true? Yes, unfortunately I am speaking the truth now. What does this fact prove? It proves that the spiritual life, the faith, if it has not already died, is in the process of dying, is hardly a flickering light any more and will soon be extinguished entirely.⁹

We would be naïve to assume that the deficiency noted by Pieper almost a century ago does not still plague us today. Tenis Van Kooten reports that “the Family Altar League of

⁸ Richard Gurgel, “Meeting the Needs of the 21st Century Family” (WLS Essay File, 1999): 14.

⁹ Pieper, “The True Reconstruction of the Church,” 91.

America recently¹⁰ estimated that only about 5 per cent of professing Christians have regular family worship in their homes.”¹¹ Tiefel saw similar deficiencies:

This author's parish days leave him with the clear impression that very few fathers and mothers in our churches organize any sort of family worship opportunity. It is likely that more individual Christians read the Scriptures privately than participate with others in household worship, but we fear that the number of these is not high.¹²

To most Christians today, the idea of conducting family devotions in the home is foreign. If people did not grow up in families that set aside time to read and meditate on God’s Word, they will not do so naturally when they form families of their own. Therefore, the pastor who seeks to teach his members to make faithful use of the Word in their homes will be swimming against the current of family customs. He must resolve to invest time and effort if he hopes to effect a positive change in this regard. Although this will be a difficult job, it is worth his time and effort and may even prove to be an endeavor that produces visible fruit, as the story of Richard Baxter, a 17th century Puritan minister in the town of Kidderminster, illustrates:

During the nineteen years Baxter served this humble field a spiritual renewal swept this town. An empty church had to be expanded several times to accommodate the crowds. The parish grew in size to over eight hundred families...Why was Richard Baxter so successful in such an unpromising field?...Did free balloons and a good busing program bring the crowd? Did people throng to hear a famous choir or soloist? Did Baxter offer the promise of a nameplate beneath a piece of glass in a multimillion dollar cathedral? Richard Baxter would have none of this. He went, straight and simple, to the homes of the people and taught them to read the Bible in the home.¹³

There is a well-known Chinese proverb that says, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” This is the principle by which Richard Baxter ran his ministry. Beyond simply giving his people spiritual nourishment, he taught them how to obtain this nourishment themselves. By doing so, he ensured that the effects of his work would endure beyond the duration of his ministry. Should not today’s pastors aspire to do the same? What nobler gift could a pastor hope to give the members of his congregation than the ability to feed and nourish their souls from the Word of God long after he is gone?

¹⁰ This book was written in 1969.

¹¹ Tenis Van Kooten, *Building the Family Altar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969), 15.

¹² James Tiefel, “Fostering the Devotional Life that Leads to Spiritual Renewal” (WLS Essay File, 1989): 3.

¹³ Degner, “Encouraging Christian Education in the Home,” 1.

Blessed is the pastor who works to encourage his people to draw spiritual strength from Christ at home. Not only is he discharging a duty that God has explicitly given him, but he is also multiplying his ministry efforts by equipping his people to do his job when he is not even present. His can be the farewell speech that the apostle Paul gave to the Ephesian elders in Acts: “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”¹⁴

This paper, then, will consist of three main sections. The first will establish reasons that motivate the family to begin home devotions. The second will examine the obstacles that families face as they seek to establish a devotional routine and explore ways to overcome those obstacles. The third will offer specific suggestions to help a family begin making devotions a part of their daily lives. It is my prayer that the material presented will assist the pastor as he sets out “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”

Why Start Home Devotions?

If the pastor hopes to see home devotions become part of the fabric of the family life of his parishioners, he must do more than simply tell his members in sermons or in Bible classes that they should be doing home devotions, for no Christian would deny that home devotions are a good thing that should be done. He must even do more than point his people to specific materials they can use to conduct home devotions, because many Christians are aware that there are materials available for home use. Such things must of course be done, but they will likely have little impact if the pastor does not first address the biggest question on people’s minds: “Why is it so important for me to make room for home devotions in my busy schedule and the busy schedules of my family?” Conscious determination is needed to make a significant change in the family’s way of life, and this can only be achieved when there is a firm conviction that the change is beneficial and necessary. What follows will seek to provide the family with the motivation to make such a significant change in their lives.

Cultural Influences

¹⁴ Acts 20:32

"Laziness in the arena of the God-Satan warfare is a good way to get killed. Unread Bibles can destroy fellowship with God. Ignoring his two messages will ruin your day, your family, your career, your life."¹⁵ Warfare is a word that can strike fear into the heart like few other words can. War conjures up thoughts of spattered blood, agonizing screams, excruciating pain, and bitter tears. War is terrifying. War is intimidating. Most Americans probably do not find themselves thinking about warfare as they go about their daily lives. The apostle Paul, however, encourages us to do just that: "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."¹⁶ Like it or not, we walk into a war every single day, a war that is fought against the forces of evil. And though these forces do not attack us with physical guns, they do have us in the crosshairs of their spiritual guns every day, and the bullets they fire come at us from everywhere: People at work, classmates in school, the media, television, advertisements, sports and entertainment figures, the framework of society, and so on. In what follows, we will consider some of the major cultural influences that open fire on our souls.

False Doctrines

False doctrines to which we are exposed unleash the most direct assault on our souls. We often think of false doctrine in connection with non-Christian religions or heterodox church bodies, but the devil does not need people to walk into a heterodox church building to assault them with his spiritual lies. As one example, he has woven the threads of postmodernism into the fabric of our everyday life in ways that affect not only us, but our children as well. Postmodernism says that absolute truth is not to be found in God's Word, but rather in our hearts as we decide what is right and wrong and what is best for us. Norman Wright comments, "Our children are growing up in a post-modern society influenced by situation ethics. Our kids are told that there are no absolutes. Right and wrong are negotiable. There is no such thing as ultimate

¹⁵ John Jeske, "Spiritual Renewal as Faithful Application of Law and Gospel in Today's Secular Society" (WLS Essay File, 1989): 2.

¹⁶ Ephesians 6:11,12

truth."¹⁷ This makes it comfortable for the sinful nature to make excuses for sin, which is deadly to faith because God damns impenitent hearts. What is more, if there really is no absolute truth, then Christianity cannot claim to be the only true religion. Mormonism and Buddhism and Hinduism all become equally valid ways of establishing a good relationship with God.

On the other side of the spectrum lie the tenets of modernism. Although the ideas of modernism have been challenged by postmodernism, they are still very much alive in our culture as well. Modernism demands empirical evidence if it is to accept anything as truth. Truth is scientific fact that must be proven to be believed. If something cannot be proven, it is a fantasy which only the most simple and naïve could accept as true. One cannot help but think of Thomas in this regard, as he refused to believe that Jesus had actually risen from the dead until he could see visible proof. Jesus, however, rebuked Thomas' stubborn demand for evidence, saying, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."¹⁸ The entire Christian faith rests on believing things that cannot be empirically proven. The writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that such "blind faith" is not to be scorned, but rather prized, for "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."¹⁹ Parents must recognize that the tenets of both modernism and postmodernism *are* impacting their children in the influences they get from school, friends, and society at large. In light of all this, Kenneth Kremer concludes that "our fight will only succeed if we remain well-grounded in our Christian faith."²⁰

Though the devil does not need heterodox church bodies to introduce his destructive heresies, these certainly do make up a large part of his arsenal. Sadly, he has succeeded in corrupting the largest and most vocal church bodies in our nation, not simply in regard to subtle questions of doctrine, but in regard to the most vital question of all: "How do people get to heaven?" American Christianity as a whole answers, "People get to heaven based on what they

¹⁷ Norman H. Wright and Gary J. Oliver, *Raising Kids to Love Jesus* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1999), 182.

¹⁸ John 20:29

¹⁹ Hebrews 11:1

²⁰ Kenneth Kremer, *From the Ground Up: A Plan to Build Your Christian Family* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000), 41.

do.” The two largest church bodies in America, Catholics and Baptists,²¹ represent the two main forms of false teaching on this matter. The Catholics teach that we get to heaven in part based on our good works. The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly states, “Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit* for ourselves and for others *the graces needed* for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and *for the attainment of eternal life.*”²² The Baptists, on the other hand, teach that we get to heaven based on our decision to accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. The Baptist Faith and Message states: “Salvation involves the redemption of the whole man, and is offered freely to all *who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior*, who by His own blood obtained eternal redemption for the believer.”²³ Other large church bodies, such as the Assemblies of God, harmonize with the Baptists on this matter:

You can pray now, wherever you are. God is listening. Tell Him in your own words that you are sorry for your sins and that you want to receive Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. Ask God to help you change your heart and life. It’s your prayer He wants to hear. You can pray the following prayer, but it is not enough just to say the words. You must mean it from your heart: “*God, I know I have sinned. I believe Your Son, Jesus Christ, died to take the punishment for my sin. I believe Jesus came back to life from death and has the power to forgive my sin and change my life. Forgive me. Come into my life and change me. I want to live for You and follow Your plan for my life. I believe You have forgiven me, and I thank You for hearing my prayer, in Jesus’ name.*”²⁴

Though these two teachings may seem to be quite different on the outside, both end up in the same place, because both teach that our salvation ultimately depends upon what people do rather than upon what God does. Both teach different forms of work-righteousness.

Perhaps one of the reasons that church bodies who teach a form of work-righteousness attract so many people is that this teaching makes the most sense in the world we live in. Our world runs on the fuel of work-righteousness. If one wants something, one must work to get it. Money only comes to those who work for it. Only the most talented athletes who have worked to

²¹ Philip E. Jenks, “Catholics, Mormons, Assemblies of God growing; Mainline Churches Report a Continuing Decline,” 12 February 2010, National Council of Churches USA, <http://www.nccusa.org/news/100204yearbook2010.html> (accessed December 10, 2011).

²² “Catechism of the Catholic Church - PART 3 SECTION 1 CHAPTER 3 ARTICLE 2,” St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, <http://www.scborromeo.org/cc/p3s1c3a2.htm#I> (accessed December 15, 2011): Paragraph 2010.

²³ “The Baptist Faith & Message,” 1999, Southern Baptist Convention, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp> (accessed December 8, 2011).

²⁴ Randy Hurst, “Following Christ,” 1997, Assemblies of God USA, <http://followchrist.ag.org/decision.cfm> (accessed December 15, 2011).

hone their skills play on TV. Good grades are given to students who work hard at school. Good jobs are given to those who have earned degrees. Medals of Honor are awarded to soldiers who put their lives on the line in battle. Punishment is doled out to those who disobey the law. Since work-righteousness characterizes the world in which we live, the central doctrine of justification by faith *apart from works* can easily be clouded if we are not being exposed to it regularly. The truth God would have us believe is counter-intuitive. We must, therefore, be especially careful to guard ourselves and our children lest we unwittingly begin to fall prey to the devil's lie of work-righteousness with regard to spiritual matters.

Chaos and Instability

If the devil cannot actively deceive a person with his false teachings, he will simply try to throw so many distractions at them and cause them to become so frazzled that they no longer have quiet moments to meditate and reflect on the truth God's Word. C.S. Lewis once reminded people of a sure-fire way to keep God at arms' length:

Avoid silence, avoid solitude, avoid any train of thought that leads off the beaten track. Concentrate on money, sex, status, health and (above all) on your own grievances. Keep the radio on. Live in a crowd. Use plenty of sedation. If you must read books, select them very carefully. But you'd be safer to stick to the papers. You'll find the advertisements helpful; especially those with a sexy or a snobbish appeal.²⁵

Sadly, Lewis' description of the God-free lifestyle is the very lifestyle that our culture encourages us to live. Kremer also notes how our society is obsessed with *newness*: "We buy the latest in new products. We enjoy using the most up-to-date technology. We watch for new trends, new twists to global happenings, new issues, new styles, new philosophies, new creature comforts, and new ideas."²⁶ He also notes, "Today's college graduates can expect to change occupations – not jobs, but occupations – five to seven times in their lifetime."²⁷ In the midst of the frenzy and instability of daily life, it can be all too easy to lose sight of Jesus. And yet, "for Christians, when everything else dissolves into chaos, Jesus remains the pillar of our strength."²⁸

²⁵ Forrest Bivens, "Using Devotional Classics" (WLS Essay File, 2007): 3.

²⁶ Kremer, *From the Ground Up*, 26.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

Family Fragmentation

If there was a time when the family was a place to find refuge from the chaos and instability raging in the outside world, that time seems to have passed. Families are becoming less a place of refuge and more a place of fragmentation. Van Kooten comments:

In former years, when the entire family worked together on a common project, perhaps a farm or a small business, a common interest in the joint project kept the family together, even when there were no common religious values. Today, however, common family projects have largely disappeared. Every member of the family goes his own way and faces his own peculiar problems.²⁹

Kremer cites the World Wars as the beginning of widespread family fragmentation. The World Wars created a vacuum in the home that women filled, causing the home to become mother-centered. Then in the 1970s and 1980s, feminism took root, sending women outside of the home to work. Now as a result, both father and mother are outside of the home on a regular basis,³⁰ if they are even present at all. The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics reports that one out of every three American children do not live with their married biological or adoptive parents.³¹ Kremer comments that "in many of today's homes, the center remains unoccupied."³² Degner also observes that "homes take on the appearance of a gas station where the family members fuel up, clean up and then rest, only to renew themselves for more activities beyond the home."³³ Since families no longer produce things together, but generally only consume things together (TV, meals, vacations, etc.), they do not learn how to communicate to accomplish goals. Family members are becoming their own persons and do not interact with other family members or rely on them as much. This loss of ability to communicate contributes

²⁹ Van Kooten, *Building the Family Altar*, 30.

³⁰ Kremer, *From the Ground Up*, 36.

³¹ "America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being," 2011, Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/famsoc1.asp> (accessed February 17, 2012). Specifically, this study reports that in 2010, only 66 percent of children ages 0-17 lived with two married parents, down from 77 percent in 1980. Twenty-three percent of children lived with only their mothers, 3 percent lived with only their fathers, and 4 percent lived with neither of their parents.

³² Kremer, *From the Ground Up*, 36.

³³ Degner, "Encouraging Christian Education in the Home," 11.

to the breakdown of the family.³⁴ In light of this, Van Kooten concludes that “only a vital family altar, where walking in the way of the Lord is a joint project, will be big enough and strong enough to hold all the members together.”³⁵

Adolescence

A major factor that contributes to family fragmentation in our society is the phenomenon of adolescence. Adolescence is a highly impressionable and volatile age for children, placing them in the awkward position between childhood and adulthood. At this age, many children begin to rebel against their parents because they are at an age when they want to have the privileges and freedom that an adult has. However, they are not yet able to handle the responsibilities that come with adulthood.

In many ways, this uncomfortable stage of adolescence is especially pronounced in American culture. On the one hand, there are factors that give children a tantalizing taste of the privileges of adulthood at an early age. On the other hand, there are factors that make it impossible for children to acquire the skills needed for adulthood until they are much older. Both of these factors stretch, from both ends, the amount of time that American children must spend in the limbo that is adolescence. Because American culture is so affluent, parents are able to give their children more money to spend, allowing them to establish some degree of independence and buying power before they have become an adult. This increases the children’s desire to enjoy adult privileges at an earlier age. However, becoming a true adult in America is harder and longer than it is in other countries. Children must go through many more years of education before they have the skills needed to get a job. In the meantime, since the father and mother work outside of the home, the children are unable to learn practical job skills from their parents that they might otherwise be able to put to use at an earlier age. What is more, this also robs parents of the time needed to teach their children the valuable life lessons needed to cause them to

³⁴ Jack O Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 351-352.

³⁵ Van Kooten, *Building the Family Altar*, 30.

mature. The result is children wanting to become adults sooner, but being unable to do so until much later.³⁶ This tension has doubtless caused incalculable strife in households across America.

Adolescence also makes children much more susceptible to peer influences. Part of seeking to establish independence is the desire to cut ties with the family on whom the adolescent is dependent. In order to be seen as mature and free, the adolescent will often gravitate toward his or her peers. Balswick comments, "One learns from peer groups what to wear, what music to listen to, what movies to see, what language is in, and so on. The greater the adolescent's insecurity, the greater the slavish obedience to doing all the right things sanctioned by the peer group."³⁷ As the adolescent becomes more and more influenced by his or her peers, the gulf between them and their parents widens even more, since children learn communication and ideas from their peer groups that parents do not understand. The mobility of American society makes this shift of focus from family to peers more natural for adolescents as well, since many immediate families move away from their extended families. Add to the mix the fact that almost one out of every three American children under age 18 live with either one parent or no parent,³⁸ and the overall influence that peers exert increases exponentially, causing the adolescent to seek the camaraderie in their peer groups that they otherwise might have found in their extended family or even in their immediate family. The buffer that the family used to provide against the outside world is greatly weakened.

Whether one recognizes it or not, American culture is at work to separate adolescents from their parents and draw them to their peers. As a result, the adolescents' spiritual beliefs and conceptions are being increasingly molded by that of their peers. A 2006 study by Kelly Schwartz supports this claim:

The second stated purpose of the study was to explore whether a transformational model existed wherein perceived faith support from friends would mediate between the perceived faith support of parents and the measure of religious faith. Although both the friend and parent scales were significantly and positively correlated with the RBC (Religious Belief Commitment) scale, the PFS-F (Peer Faith Support - Friends) scale ($r=.56$) was notably higher than that of the PFS-P (Parent Faith Support - Parents) scale

³⁶ Balswick, *The Family*, 158-160.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

³⁸ "America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being," <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/famsoc1.asp>.

($r=.30$). As expected, this finding suggests that faith support from friends is more strongly associated with religious faith than is faith support from parents.³⁹

Such a finding may seem to indicate that adolescents today would sooner listen to their peers than they would to their parents with regard to religious matters. John MacArthur, however, interprets this finding differently:

Still, a moment's reflection will reveal *why* parents in our culture have less influence on their kids than peer groups do: Most parents have simply abdicated the parental role. They have turned their kids over to their peers. They have invested less time in teaching their kids than the amount of time they have permitted the kids to watch television. They have permitted all their children's spiritual, moral, and ethical instruction to come from television, movies, music, and other children. Even in the best cases, parents rely too much on school teachers, Sunday-school teachers, and youth leaders - all outside the purview of the family. Parents must realize that character is neither inbred by genetics nor picked up by osmosis. Children are *taught* to be what they become. If they have become something other than what the parents hoped for, it is usually because they have simply learned from those who were there to teach them in their parents' absence.⁴⁰

Schwartz herself also concurs with MacArthur's statement by refusing to diminish the importance of parental influence: "Given the important role of parents in adolescent religious faith was well supported by the findings of this study, it would be erroneous to conclude that peers completely supersede the impact that mothers and fathers have on the faith development of their adolescent children."⁴¹ The bottom line for Christian parents is that they need to be actively influencing their children with regards to their religious beliefs, especially during adolescence, because their adolescent children likely will not receive positive religious influence from their peers. In order for this to happen, the family needs time to come together as a group so adolescents can know that their family is a group they belong to and can rely on, a group that will help them deal with the challenges of life. Even if parents feel that their religious influence is being ignored, they must not use this as an excuse to give up. It is normal for teenagers to want to assert their independence from their parents and for that desire to carry over even into their attitudes toward religious activities. Roger Dudley comments:

Parental modeling and reinforcement have facilitated the internalization of [religious values] by the child, and even the independence of adolescence cannot usually obliterate these values completely. While the youth lean toward the non-traditional end of the scale,

³⁹ Kelly Dean Schwartz, "Transformations in Parent and Friend Faith Support Predicting Adolescents' Religious Faith," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 16, no. 4 (2006): 319.

⁴⁰ John MacArthur, *Successful Christian Parenting* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 20-21.

⁴¹ Schwartz, "Transformations in Parent and Friend Faith Support," 322.

they are likely to vary with their parents on the traditional to non-traditional continuum. That is to say that more traditional parents tend to have youth who are more traditional than their peers, although less traditional than their parents.⁴²

Lest Schwartz' study should make parents feel that their efforts to influence their adolescent children are futile, it should be noted that other studies have found the opposite to be true, concluding that parents have more of an impact on their children's religious beliefs than peers do. "King et al. (2002) found that family influences (e.g., communication, activities) were moderately stronger predictors of religious importance and experience than were peer variables."⁴³ The role that family plays in influencing the lives of children has not yet capitulated to the influence of peers. Parents must still make every effort to ensure that their influence is felt.

Materialism

Perhaps MacArthur's charge that "most parents have simply abdicated the parental role" goes too far in many cases. There are doubtless many parents who want to have a positive influence on their children's lives and who expend a great deal of effort toward that end. Being a good parent to their children is something that they take very seriously. Our materialistic culture, however, may have skewed many parents' notions of what being a good parent actually entails. Balswick explains:

A basic assumption of middle-class American society is that we are obligated to hand down to our children a certain social status and economic security. Family life is oriented toward this goal. A decision to sacrifice socioeconomic status in order to live more simply will be perceived as a threat to the existing order. The children involved, other family members, and friends may criticize someone who takes a low-paying job in order to spend more time with the family.⁴⁴

Many times parents feel the need to give their children the opportunity to live a better life than their own. This is not necessarily a bad desire, as long as parents have a correct understanding of what a "better life" is. Our materialistic culture would have us believe that a better life consists in having more things. "We live in a world so preoccupied with things, doing things, having things, more things, everything, the more things the better. It imagines that things will give them joy,

⁴² Roger Dudley, "Transmission of Religious Values from Parents to Adolescents," *Review of Religious Research* 28, no.1 (September 1986): 13.

⁴³ Schwartz, "Transformations in Parent and Friend Faith Support," 321.

⁴⁴ Balswick, *The Family*, 357.

fulfillment and satisfaction. Scripture does not equate happiness with things."⁴⁵ Often, however, the continual desire for more things does not just come from a longing to live in luxury. It also comes from a desire to distinguish one's self in society:

Our world has trained us to hunger and thirst after pleasure, stimulation, novelty, satisfaction, possessions, blessings and success. Our culture pressures us to model materialism rather than maturity. We live in an addictive generation that is controlled by desires for possessions and other things that will help us look successful.⁴⁶

If parents do not consciously swim against the current of materialism, they may unknowingly be teaching their children to live a life that is focused on storing up treasures on earth rather than on storing up treasures in heaven:

We (parents) pander to their (children's) desires and wishes. We teach them to find their soul's delight in going places and doing things. We attempt to satisfy their lust for excitement. We fill their young lives with distractions from God. We give them material things and take delight in their delight in possessions. Then we hope that somewhere down the line, they will see that a life worth living is found only in knowing and serving God.⁴⁷

Where this is the case, parents may only succeed in making their children's lives better on this earth and not better for eternity. Parents who have spent all their energies equipping their children to have the skills necessary to land a high-salary job have failed if they have not also spent considerable energy equipping their children with the truths of God's Word. As the church father John Chrysostom once said:

Is it not utterly absurd to send them (children) into trades or to school, and to do anything and everything for the sake of this, and not to bring the children up in the training and instruction of the Lord?...Let us give them a pattern, making them devote themselves from the earliest age to the reading of the Scriptures...If your child learns to be a lover of wisdom from the beginning of his life, he shall acquire wealth greater than all wealth and a mightier glory...Give him the great things, not the little things.⁴⁸

The only knowledge that truly matters is the saving knowledge of the Lord and of his Scriptures. Getting the best education in science or math or reading or history or sports is comparatively worthless. As Paul says in Philippians chapter 3, "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to

⁴⁵ Leroy A. Dobberstein, "Scripture Speaks to the Family," (WLS Essay File, 1988): 7.

⁴⁶ Wright, *Raising Kids to Love Jesus*, 175.

⁴⁷ Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), 66, quoted in Wright, *Raising Kids to Love Jesus*, 189-190.

⁴⁸ Marvin Otterstatter, "Exegesis of Ephesians 6:4 and Deuteronomy 6:6-9," (WLS Essay File, 1979): 10.

the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”⁴⁹ This knowledge certainly will not come from the materialistic world that children live in today. Parents must intentionally provide it.

Immoral Influence

"Imagine the devil ringing your doorbell and asking, 'May I have your children?'"⁵⁰ Certainly no parent would be so heartless as to turn their children over to Satan on the spot. Yet too often the devil does not need to have parental permission to exert influence over the children. He can pipe his immoral filth into almost every home in America – not through the front door, but through the television. "The American Family Association revealed that 89 percent of all sex depicted on TV is outside of marriage."⁵¹ In 1988, "the average PG movie contained a dozen four-letter words, 10 profanities and 6 sexual innuendoes, often explicit. You can double that number for PG-13 movies."⁵² Anyone who has followed the rating system over the years knows that things have gotten even worse because the system has allowed increasingly greater amounts of sinful behavior without raising the rating level.

Immoral movies and shows, however, are not the only things that appear on TV screens across America. Video games dominate screen time as well, and often are no more wholesome than movies, even inflicting harmful effects on those who play them. An article in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* recently reported that "regularly playing a violent video game for a week led to brain changes seen in MRI scans that researchers say may desensitize young men to violence."⁵³ The menu of temptations the internet offers is another serious threat. Studies have shown that the pornography industry makes more money every year than the National Basketball

⁴⁹ Philippians 3:7,8

⁵⁰ Kenneth Kremer, David Beckman, and Delora Hartzell, "Families Under God (Leader's Guide)," (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2010), 44.

⁵¹ Wright, *Raising Kids to Love Jesus*, 18.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ John Fauber, "Brain Change Linked to Video Gaming," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, December 2, 2011), sec. Local.

Association, the National Football League, and Major League Baseball combined.⁵⁴ Considering how greatly America obsesses over sports as a whole, this statistic is rather shocking. To think that children remain unaffected by all of this as they watch computer screens and television screens would be naïve.

As shocking as these and other statistics concerning the immorality of our society may be, we should not be surprised by them. Paul warns us in 2 Timothy chapter 3:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.⁵⁵

Every age may doubtless point to their culture as the fulfillment of these words. Even before these words were written, God offered this timeless critique through the prophet Jeremiah: “Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush.”⁵⁶ This is the reality of our immoral world.

For parents, therefore, the question is not *if* they will need to counteract these immoral influences, but *how* they will do so. The Lord himself gives us his solution through Paul in Ephesians:

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.⁵⁷

The Word of God is the most powerful weapon that parents have to fight off the devastation that the devil wants to wreak in their homes through his immoral influences. Should parents choose to neglect it, the consequences would be tremendous.

Self-Vindication

⁵⁴ “Porn Profits: Corporate America’s Secret,” 27 May 2004, ABC News, <http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=132370&page=1#.TyhNflawSck> (accessed February 18, 2012).

⁵⁵ 2 Timothy 3:1-5

⁵⁶ Jeremiah 8:12a

⁵⁷ Ephesians 6:11,16,17

One final aspect that might be mentioned under cultural influences is the idea of self-vindication. American culture tells people that unless they want to be viewed as weak or inadequate, they must never admit that they are wrong. Those who do so lose respect and standing. Even if a person is wrong, they must find a way to vindicate their words and actions so that they appear to have been in the right all along. Wright comments, "Unfortunately, repentance isn't a popular concept in today's world. To repent means that I must acknowledge my weakness, my blind spots, my selfishness, my pride, my narcissism."⁵⁸ And yet, confession of wrongdoing is at the heart of Christianity. This was the substance of Jesus' message: "'The time has come,' [Jesus] said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'"⁵⁹ If our culture succeeds in convincing people that they must always vindicate themselves at all costs and never resort to any admission of wrongdoing, then it has succeeded in ripping out one of Christianity's vital organs. May it not be so among Christian families! When the family comes together, admits to each other that they have sinned and thereby models humble confession for one another, they help each other resist this deadly feature of our culture.

It would be foolish for us to look at all the sinful influences with which our culture inundates us and assume that we, by our own resolve and determination, can resist them. Such a notion may be compared to a man does all he can to insulate his house against the cold, but never bothers to build a fire.⁶⁰ Parents can try to protect their families from the bad influences of the world, but to stay alive we need to actively combat these influences with the fire of God's Word warming our homes. Kremer notes, "We need to get over the notion that we can insulate ourselves against the tidal wave of unbelief. Our homes are very leaky."⁶¹

Inner Influences

Of course, one does not need to step outside the home or even turn on the TV to find oneself bombarded by evil influences, because the devil has an ally inside everyone. That ally is

⁵⁸ Wright, *Raising Kids to Love Jesus*, 183.

⁵⁹ Mark 1:15

⁶⁰ Kenneth J. Kremer, "Home, Sweet Home: Practical Aspects of Ministry to the Devotional Family," (WLS Essay File, 1996): 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

our own sinful nature, and he fights valiantly. Even the apostle Paul could not escape from the influences of his sinful nature. He says in Romans,

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!⁶²

Paul hints at the only force that can oppose his sinful nature, his “inner being [which] delights in God's law.” God's law, his Word, is needed to counteract our sinful natures as well.

God's Plan throughout Scripture is that Parents Instruct their Children

God knows how powerful and prevalent these evil influences are in the lives and cultures of his people. That is why his plan throughout Scripture is that parents instruct their children in his Word at home. In the Bible, of course, one will not find examples of individual families gathering together and opening up God's Word after supper. At the time of the patriarchs, there was not a widely available written Word of God. Even after the time of Moses and the Prophets, when God's Word was available in written form, these writings were either not accessible to the common person, or they were so expensive that most could not afford them. Just because Scripture reading was corporate, however, did not mean that God intended to turn over the family's spiritual responsibilities to a corporate institution. God still wanted families to meditate on his mighty deeds and on the wonders he had performed for them. It is not until recent history that God's Word has been made so readily available to families in their homes. Is this not an incredible blessing of God of which he would have us take full advantage? As we take a brief survey of what God has to say about families in the pages of Scripture, we will see that this is indeed his will.

Spiritual family gatherings at the time of the patriarchs took the form of fathers building altars and recounting the wonderful acts of God, calling on his name. Peter tells us that Noah was a “preacher of righteousness.”⁶³ As such, he faithfully led his family to worship the true God. The first thing Noah did when he came out of the ark was to gather his family together and build

⁶² Romans 7:21-25

⁶³ 2 Peter 2:5

an altar to the Lord.⁶⁴ He and his family were the only righteous people left on the earth, so they had no choice but to worship together as a family.

Ten generations later, we see Abraham continue in the pattern that his forefather Noah had set. Interestingly enough, a timeline of the patriarchs' life spans will show that Noah was still alive when Abraham was born. Glen Schmiede's conclusion is valid: "To help the ancients in the work of passing the promise, the Lord gave them exceptionally long lives."⁶⁵ Abraham built an altar at Schechem,⁶⁶ then east of Bethel,⁶⁷ then near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron.⁶⁸ Schmiede comments:

The pattern in [Abraham's] life was "pitch a tent, dig a well and build an altar." The Lord had these complimentary words to say about this family man, "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him" (Gen 18:19).⁶⁹

The Lord's words here validate the pattern of worship that Abraham utilized and indicate that his plan was that fathers instruct their own families in his Word. That this plan was successful is demonstrated in the lives of Isaac⁷⁰ and Jacob,⁷¹ who both continued their fathers' traditions of gathering their families around God's altar.

As we move forward to the time of Moses, believers became much more numerous as the children of Israel expanded. To provide order to this community, the Lord through Moses instituted an intricate system of sacrifices and tabernacle worship organized and orchestrated by priests and Levites. Many of the spiritual activities God wanted his people involved in obviously took them outside of the individual family setting of the patriarchs to the tabernacle. If one was led to assume, however, that God was now replacing the family with "corporate worship,"

⁶⁴ Genesis 8:18-20

⁶⁵ Glen F. Schmiede, "A Biblical Look at Bible Study: Or, Feasting on the Word of God and its Nutritional Benefits vs. Snacking on the Word of God and the Resulting Spiritual Malnutrition," (WLS Essay File, 1984): 7.

⁶⁶ Genesis 12:7

⁶⁷ Genesis 12:8

⁶⁸ Genesis 13:18

⁶⁹ Schmiede, "A Biblical Look at Bible Study," 7-8.

⁷⁰ Genesis 26:25

⁷¹ Genesis 35:2,3

requiring only that fathers perform the necessary sacrifices and rituals connected with Israel's public worship, this assumption would be overturned by Moses' words in Deuteronomy:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.⁷²

The word translated "impress" has the idea of sharpening.⁷³ The parents are to use God's word as a sharp sword or arrow to penetrate their children. What an emphatic way of emphasizing the active and intentional role parents are still to play in the spiritual upbringing of their children! Though this is the most famous passage from Deuteronomy that speaks of the family (specifically the *father*) as the primary spiritual educator of the children, it is by no means the only one.⁷⁴ God's plan to keep the nation of Israel faithful to himself involved an intensive program of education in the home.

It would be a false dichotomy, however, to separate the public and private facets of Israel's spiritual life, as if the two were in competition with each other. In many ways, the public rituals and festivals that the Lord instituted through Moses were meant to *assist* the father in his private, familial role. The ceremonial and civil laws were such a part of the day-to-day life of the Israelites that the father had no choice but to explain them to his children. Edith Deen gives one example:

One can well imagine each member of the family having a part in the preparation for [the Passover]. The father and his eldest son would select a lamb from the flock and perhaps invite a neighbor who lived alone with his old father to join the celebration. The mother would grind the meal, bake the unleavened bread, and light a fire for the roast. Meanwhile the children would bring in more firewood, sweep out the house, gather bitter herbs, and find their father's shoes and staff. Even the small children knew from the scriptural words they had been taught that this feast was a sacred one celebrated throughout all generations...Eagerly the youngest child, or in some families the eldest son, waited for his special part in the ritual of the feast. It was his privilege to ask the age-old question, "What mean ye by this service?" (Ex 12:26). His father, as the chief celebrant, replied, "It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, who passed over the houses

⁷² Deuteronomy 6:6-9

⁷³ From the root יָצַו

⁷⁴ Deuteronomy 4:9,10; 6:20-25; 11:18-21

of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians and delivered our houses (Ex 12:27).⁷⁵

The Feast of Unleavened Bread immediately followed the Passover and was also centered on the home. Throughout the entire week, families were instructed to clear all yeast from their homes and eat only unleavened bread. This would undoubtedly break up the normal family routine, stimulating discussion amongst the family members of how the Lord delivered them from Egypt.

Another example of a family-focused feast is the Feast of Tabernacles. In the seventh month (September-October), the Lord commanded this week-long celebration for the harvest. He said, "Live in booths for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in booths so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God."⁷⁶ The family would then move out of their permanent dwelling and go camping, putting together a temporary shelter made out of tree branches which would serve as their dwelling for a week. This setting would certainly accomplish the Lord's aim that posterity remember his deliverance from Egypt, because the young children would certainly ask why they were moving out of their house for a week. The father would then have the chance to tell them about how the Lord delivered them from Egypt. Deen elaborates more on the likely participation of each family member during this feast:

All the members of a family might well be employed in preparations for the Feast of Weeks, as the ritual for it in Leviticus 23:15-21 specified that two ordinary loaves of bread were to be offered to the Lord. Though the mother and her daughters ground the meal, measured it, made a fire in the oven, procured yeast, kneaded the dough, formed loaves and baked them, the father and his sons first had to harvest the wheat and thresh it, all according to the Law: "You shall bring from your dwellings two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah; they shall be of fine flour, they shall be baked with leaven, as first fruits to the Lord (Leviticus 23:17, RSV).⁷⁷

Many of the other feasts and the daily sacrifices involved activities that would begin at home. This would give the father even more chances to have spiritual conversations with his children. Questions such as, "Dad, why do you bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest? Why do you take a bull to sacrifice as a burnt offering?" would certainly be asked. Clearly, the Lord designed the entire system of Old Testament worship to involve the family, not

⁷⁵ Edith Deen, *Family Living in the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 148.

⁷⁶ Leviticus 23:42,43

⁷⁷ Deen, *Family Living*, 149-150.

only in public, corporate worship, but also in private religious discussions. As he says through Moses in Deuteronomy: “In the future, when your son asks you, ‘What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?’ tell him: ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.’”⁷⁸

We see this pattern continue with Moses’ successor, Joshua. Right from the outset, the Lord exhorts Joshua with these words, “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it *day and night*, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.”⁷⁹ Joshua also understood that he was not to meditate on the Lord’s Word simply to benefit himself; he was also to do so in order to be the spiritual leader in his home. After his conquest of the Promised Land, Joshua declared to the people: “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”⁸⁰ Even at the beginning of his conquest, right after the Israelites had crossed over the Jordan River into the Promised Land, Joshua’s words echoed Moses’ in Deuteronomy:

Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, “What do these stones mean?” tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever...He said to the Israelites, “In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’”⁸¹

These same exhortations are not absent from the later prophets, wisdom literature, and psalms. Isaiah declares, “The living, the living—they praise you, as I am doing today; fathers tell their children about your faithfulness.”⁸² This theme is carried through in Proverbs as well, both explicitly and implicitly. Perhaps the most famous passage is this: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”⁸³ But there are other explicit statements

⁷⁸ Deuteronomy 6:20,21

⁷⁹ Joshua 1:8

⁸⁰ Joshua 24:15

⁸¹ Joshua 4:5-7,21,22

⁸² Isaiah 38:19

⁸³ Proverbs 22:6. This passage has often been interpreted in a way that could be wrongfully burdensome to parents’ consciences. Since Proverbs is wisdom literature, the basis for its assertions is tradition and general human observation, not divinely revealed truth. Therefore, this passage is wrongly interpreted when it is said that if a child

such as that found in Proverbs chapter 4: “When I was a boy in my father’s house, still tender, and an only child of my mother, he taught me and said, ‘Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live.’”⁸⁴ As Richard Hess points out, however, there are even more implicit statements: “Where the teacher and the pupil are identified in Proverbs, it is usually, but not always, a father who addresses a son.”⁸⁵ Asaph emphasizes this theme explicitly in Psalm 78:

O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old— what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.⁸⁶

As we move on to the New Testament, we see that Jesus had the same attitude toward the home. He saw it as a place where spiritual edification must take place. Van Kooten comments, “Jesus ministered as much in the midst of the home as in the sanctuary and out on the street.”⁸⁷ We often see Jesus going into the homes of friends, tax collectors, and even of Pharisees. Deen writes:

[Jesus] celebrated a wedding with the family at Cana. Peter's mother-in-law helped serve Him dinner at Peter's house in Capernaum. He dined at the home of His disciple Matthew (Matthew 9:10) and accepted an invitation from a Pharisee (Luke 7:36). He visited homes like that of Zacchaeus at Jericho...Jesus "sat at meat" (Mark 14:3; Luke 7:36-50) in the Bethany home of Simon "the leper," also called the Pharisee...Another home He visited was that of Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus in Bethany.⁸⁸

does depart from the way of the Lord in his lifetime, that is evidence that the parents failed in training him or her in the way of the Lord. Rather, the passage is a statement that can be said to be generally true in many circumstances.

⁸⁴ Proverbs 4:3,4

⁸⁵ Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll R., eds., *Family in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 84.

⁸⁶ Psalm 78:1-7

⁸⁷ Van Kooten, *Building the Family Altar*, 28.

⁸⁸ Deen, *Family Living*, 232.

Although Jesus had the desire to reach as many people as possible, he did not consider it a waste of time to leave the multitudes and teach in the private home setting. He even encouraged others to do the same. After healing the demon-possessed man, Jesus actually discouraged him from carrying out a public ministry in favor of a private, family ministry: “As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, ‘Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.’”⁸⁹

After Jesus ascended into heaven, his New Testament church held its first gathering in the home and continued to include the home – not just the temple – as a religious gathering-place. Luke tells us in Acts, “Every day they continued to meet together *in the temple courts*. They broke bread *in their homes* and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”⁹⁰ As time went on, other churches grew up around the home as well,⁹¹ notably that of Priscilla and Aquila, both in Ephesus and in Rome.⁹² Beyond simply mentioning house churches used for public gatherings, the New Testament also cites examples of devout Christian families who used their homes as private incubators of faith.⁹³

Because of the prominence attached to the home, the apostles recognized the need to teach and preach the gospel in private households as well, and not just in the temple courts. Luke tells us in Acts: “Day after day, in the temple courts *and from house to house*, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”⁹⁴ Paul in particular often

⁸⁹ Mark 5:18,19

⁹⁰ Luke 2:46

⁹¹ Philemon 2: “To Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to *the church that meets in your home*.” Colossians 4:15: “Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and *the church in her house*.”

⁹² 1 Corinthians 16:19 (written from Ephesus): “The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does *the church that meets at their house*.” Romans 16:3-5: “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also *the church that meets at their house*.”

⁹³ Acts 18:8: “Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.” Romans 16:10-11: “Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my relative. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.” Acts 10:1-2: “At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing.”

⁹⁴ Acts 5:42

focused his attention on converting families, not limiting himself simply to the public arena.⁹⁵ His exhortation from Ephesians indicates that this was not mere personal preference, but is in fact the Lord's will: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."⁹⁶ Van Kooten comments: "If this family aspect of the ministry of the gospel is lost, something essential is lost. The family, the basic unit of society, must be involved in nurturing the faith."⁹⁷

Consequences of the Lack of Home Devotions in Scripture

Ever since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, human beings have felt the painful consequences that result from disregarding the will of God. Scripture is full of examples and warnings of the consequences that result when parents disregard God's will in this matter by failing to provide spiritual training and instruction in the home.

God gives his own verbal warning when he lays down the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Acts 20:20 (To the Ephesian elders): "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you *publicly* and *from house to house*." Acts 16:13-15: "On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, *she invited us to her home*. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us." Acts 16:31-34: "They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.' Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and *to all the others in his house*. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family."

⁹⁶ Ephesians 6:4

⁹⁷ Van Kooten, *Building the Family Altar*, 29.

⁹⁸ Exodus 20:3-6

At first glance, it may seem as if God punishes people for transgressions of which only their parents are guilty. In Ezekiel, however, God clearly states that this is not so.⁹⁹ Therefore, we must conclude that the sins for which God punishes the children are sins which they themselves have committed. These sins, however, can still be said to be “sins of the fathers” because they are the same kind of sins that the fathers too committed. What God seems to be saying here is that when fathers, by their example, teach their children to lead the same godless, sinful lifestyle that they themselves lead, they are causing their children to fall under the punishment of God (to the degree that the children follow in their fathers’ footsteps). This is certainly a wake-up call for fathers to instruct their children in the ways of the Lord and not in the ways of Satan (which often happens by default), for what father would want to bear any responsibility for his children’s condemnation?

Sadly, this scenario played itself out many times over the course of history. We read in Genesis of how Lot and his family made Sodom their home. In that time, Lot appears to have become involved with the business life and perhaps even the government of the city. When we meet him in Genesis, he is “sitting in the gateway of the city,”¹⁰⁰ the center for business and governmental activity. Throughout their stay in Sodom, Lot and his family were constantly exposed to the wickedness of the city’s inhabitants. Rampant homosexuality and a complete disregard for God’s holy will surrounded them. It is clear that Lot was unprepared to defend himself and his family against this constant, prolonged exposure to such immorality. We see this in the way Lot addressed homosexual men as “my friends”¹⁰¹ and failed to rebuke them with God’s law. He offered to satisfy the men’s sinful desires by giving them different victims, his own two daughters. Though Peter tells us that Lot “was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men,”¹⁰² it does not appear that distress drove him to keep his family close to the Lord. His sons-in-law did not believe him when he told them that the Lord would destroy the city, so it is likely that Lot had not said much to them about God’s attitude toward sin. His daughters had no qualms

⁹⁹ Ezekiel 18:20: “The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him.”

¹⁰⁰ Genesis 19:1

¹⁰¹ Genesis 19:7

¹⁰² 2 Peter 2:7

about getting their father so drunk that he would sleep with them and give them children, so it does not seem that Lot had spent much time telling them to trust in the Lord and follow his will.¹⁰³ The lesson is clear: If one does not counter the sinful influences surrounding him and his family with God's Word, he is opening up precious souls to Satan's deadly attacks – and Satan will not give up the attack until he has won.

The book of Judges records how this scenario played itself out on a much larger scale:

The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel. After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals.¹⁰⁴

It has well been said that the gospel is only one generation away from being lost. Generally speaking, at this juncture of Israel's history, it appears this is exactly what happened. All it took was one generation of parents who failed to impress upon their children the great deliverances God had accomplished for them, and Israel degenerated into gross idolatry. So began the chorus repeated throughout the book of Judges: "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord." It is interesting that in the book of Judges, when God wants to illustrate the spiritual depravity of his people, he does not shine the spotlight on their lackluster public worship life. Rather, he shines it on the corruption that took place in the lives of families. This is perhaps a subtle way of indicating that the root problem of spiritual degeneration begins at home, not at church. In Judges chapter 17, the spotlight falls on a rural home in the hill country of Ephraim:

Now a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim said to his mother, "The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you and about which I heard you utter a curse—I have that silver with me; I took it." Then his mother said, "The LORD bless you, my son!" When he returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, she said, "I solemnly consecrate my silver to the LORD for my son to make a carved image and a cast idol. I will give it back to you." So he returned the silver to his mother, and she took two hundred shekels of silver and gave them to a silversmith, who made them into the image and the idol. And they were put in Micah's house. Now this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and some idols and installed one of his sons as his priest. In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Steven L Lange, "Families of the Bible (Leader's Guide)" (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2007): 25.

¹⁰⁴ Judges 2:7,10,11

¹⁰⁵ Judges 17:1-6

It is hard to mention just how many things are wrong with the picture that is here portrayed. A son steals silver from his mother; the mother fails to rebuke her son and blesses him instead; the mother imagines that the Lord would be pleased with an idol and dedicates her silver to that purpose; Micah takes the completed idols and places them in his house along with other idols he made, and Micah installs his non-Levite son as priest over his household. The appraisal that “everyone did as he saw fit” certainly is not a positive one. The Lord chose to use a corrupt home to illustrate the spiritually corrupt state of his people that resulted from the fathers’ failure in Judges chapter 2 to train their children in the Lord.

Toward the end of the period of the judges, we meet Eli and his two notorious sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Since Eli was a priest, his sons were regularly exposed to the public worship and sacrifices at the tabernacle, even becoming priests themselves. This, however, was not enough to mold them into God-fearing men, because their father neglected to reinforce the spiritual training that took place at the tabernacle with spiritual training at home. Hophni and Phinehas even went so far as to sleep with the women who served at the tabernacle. Because Eli failed to bring his sons up in the training of the Lord *at home*, the Lord held him responsible. He told Samuel in his vision:

I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family – from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore, I swore to the house of Eli, “The guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.”¹⁰⁶

The Lord later brought about the untimely death of Hophni and Phinehas in a battle with the Philistines.

Even after witnessing the judgment that the Lord brought upon Eli’s family, it appears that Samuel too failed to bring his children up in the LORD. We hear in 1 Samuel:

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice. So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ 1 Samuel 3:12-14

¹⁰⁷ 1 Samuel 8:1-5

We read later that the Lord was displeased with the people because of this request and even warned them that the king they asked for would bring them great distress, a prediction that clearly came true under the reign of Saul. It is interesting to note, however, that Samuel's failure to train up his sons in the Lord is what seems to have precipitated this request that plunged Israel into the godless reign of Saul. Grave consequences result when the Lord and his Word are absent from the home!

Even the great King David has a black mark in Scripture similar to that of Eli and Samuel. When David's son Amnon fell in love with his sister Tamar and raped her, we hear that David was furious, but he did nothing about it. As a result of David's inactivity, his son Absalom killed Amnon. It appears that David was not regularly involved in the spiritual training and admonition of his children in the home. Rather, he seems absent, as the author of 1 Kings also indicates:

Now Adonijah, whose mother was Haggith, put himself forward and said, "I will be king." So he got chariots and horses ready, with fifty men to run ahead of him. (His father (David) had never interfered with him by asking, "Why do you behave as you do?" He was also very handsome and was born next after Absalom).¹⁰⁸

This vacuum of spiritual headship was a significant cause of all the turmoil David endured in his household, which we read about in 2 Samuel and 1 Kings.

Unfortunately, it seems that in this regard, Solomon followed in his father's footsteps. Solomon started his reign well, completing the temple that David instructed him to build. Never has a house of God looked so beautiful and glorious. And yet, Solomon failed to give as much attention to the spiritual condition of his own house as he had to the house of God. We read in 1 Kings: "As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been."¹⁰⁹ It is not until we are introduced to Solomon's son, Rehoboam, that we see just how detrimental the effects of Solomon's godless household were. When Rehoboam became king, his godless attitude resulted in the division of his father's kingdom. The spiritual depravity of the kings that followed eventually plunged God's people into exile and destruction.

The prophet Jeremiah gives us a glimpse of what things were like in Judah in the years before the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and carried them off into exile:

¹⁰⁸ 1 Kings 1:5,6

¹⁰⁹ 1 Kings 11:4

Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to anger...This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: 'Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you.'"¹¹⁰

This verses paint an abominable picture. Evidently, families were still going to the temple and offering sacrifices and burnt offerings to the Lord, and yet at the same time were making offerings to false gods on their own. This was a pattern that had been passed down from generation to generation.¹¹¹ The Lord, however, was not fooled by their duplicity. Because the homes were so spiritually corrupt, their outward rituals in public worship meant nothing to him. The spiritual condition of the homes was a clear sign to the Lord that their hearts were far from him. We, too, must take care lest our public worship be negatively counteracted in the Lord's eyes by our spiritually deficient homes.

Paul writes in Romans, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us."¹¹² Wisdom teaches us to take note of these past examples from the Old Testament and learn from them, lest we repeat the same sins of neglecting the Lord and his Word in our homes and bring consequences upon ourselves and our children.

Parental Influence

Even in an age when peers have greater influence over adolescent children than in times past, the influence that parents have over their children still cannot be underestimated. Whether or not they will admit it, adolescent children are greatly influenced by their parents' faith, as has been demonstrated above. In this section, we will attempt to identify specific parental influences that serve to successfully transmit the faith of the parents to the children.

¹¹⁰ Jeremiah 7:17,18,21-23

¹¹¹ Jeremiah 9:14: "They have followed the stubbornness of their hearts; they have followed Baals, *as their fathers taught them.*" When Josiah found the Book of the Law in the temple, he said: "Great is the LORD's anger that is poured out on us *because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD*; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written in this book" (2 Chronicles 34:21).

¹¹² Romans 15:4

Studies have shown that fathers in particular have a great spiritual impact on their children. "Baker-Sperry (2001) finds that fathers' religiosity has a much stronger effect on the religiosity of adult children than mothers' religiosity."¹¹³ This should of course not surprise us, since the Lord himself places this responsibility on fathers.¹¹⁴ Otterstatter draws the obvious conclusion that when fathers then do not put their faith into words for their children to hear, "the spiritual training of the child suffers, even if the parent seeks the assistance offered by the church, where religious training can be nothing more than a course of study."¹¹⁵ Unfortunately, John Brug notes that in the church at large, this problem is not simply theoretical: "The failure of all-too-many men to exercise Christ-like leadership in their families and in the church is one of the most serious problems confronting the church and society."¹¹⁶ With the Lord's help, then, this is a problem that must be addressed.

In a study of young adults from age 18 to 25, Lynn Okagaki, Kimberly Hammond, and Laura Seamon found two general factors that contribute to religious transmission: "As expected, the degree to which young adults share their parents' beliefs is related to the accuracy of the perceptions of those beliefs and their desire to share their parents' beliefs."¹¹⁷ In other words, in order for parents to successfully transmit their beliefs to their children, they must see to it that the children have a clear understanding of what those beliefs are, and they must impart those beliefs in such a way that the children will have the desire to imitate them. We will now look at some specific parental influences that can aid them in these two areas.

The Desire to Share Parents' Beliefs

¹¹³ Christopher D. Bader and Scott A. Desmond, "Do as I Say and as I Do: The Effects of Consistent Parental Beliefs and Behaviors Upon Religious Transmission," *Sociology of Religion* 67, no.3 (2006): 315.

¹¹⁴ Ephesians 6:4: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

¹¹⁵ Otterstatter, "Exegesis of Ephesians 6:4 and Deuteronomy 6:6-9," 7.

¹¹⁶ John F. Brug, "A Bible Study on Man and Woman in God's World" (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992): vi.

¹¹⁷ Lynn Okagaki, Kimberly A. Hammond, and Laura Seamon, "Socialization of Religious Beliefs," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 20, no.2 (1999): 291-292.

In the area of the children's desire to share their parents' beliefs, the first aspect that might be mentioned is the parent-child relationship. In the same study mentioned above, the authors reference a study by Dudley to show that transmission is hindered when parents are unnecessarily harsh with their children:

Dudley (1978) found that alienation from conservative religious beliefs was related to adolescents' perceptions of the parent-child relationship. The degree to which adolescents saw their parents as being authoritarian, using harsher discipline techniques (e.g., embarrassing the adolescent in front of others, belittling the adolescent), and being less accepting and nurturing was positively related to distance from conservative religious beliefs.¹¹⁸

It is no wonder, then, that the Lord says through Paul in Ephesians: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."¹¹⁹ The word translated "exasperate" literally means "to make angry." When parents are unnecessarily harsh towards and critical of their children, this may cause them to feel a sense of anger or resentment toward their parents. This anger will make the children all the less likely to want to emulate their parents' behaviors, religious or otherwise. On the contrary, Schwartz notes that "numerous studies have found that those who had a warm, close relationship with their parents were more likely to share the religious beliefs of their parents."¹²⁰ Parents must invest the necessary time to know their children, understand them, and show them love. This will naturally cause the children to have the desire to be like their parents and emulate their faith. Home devotions provide parents the opportunity to take some needed time to show this love to their children. This is why I will recommend below that parents begin the devotion time by asking their children about the high points and low points of their day.

Okagaki mentions two other factors that contribute to children's desires to share their parents' faith:

We found, in particular, that quality of the parent-child relationship, the young adults' perceptions of the importance of religious beliefs to their parents, and the degree of mother-father agreement were all related to young adults' desires to have beliefs that are similar to their parents' beliefs and to the agreement between young adults' beliefs and their perceptions of their parents' beliefs. Young adults who viewed their parents as being authoritative (including monitoring children's behaviors, granting increasing autonomy,

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 275.

¹¹⁹ Ephesians 6:4

¹²⁰ Schwartz, "Transformations in Parent and Friend Faith Support," 312.

and maintaining a warm relationship with their children) and having developed a secure attachment relationship with their children expressed a stronger desire to share their parents' beliefs and held beliefs that were more similar to their perceptions of their parents' beliefs.¹²¹

Van Kooten comments, "If parents do not show an enthusiasm about the service of God in their own lives, they are not going to influence the children that the fear of God is good for them."¹²²

It stands to reason that if parents hope to instill in their children a desire to imitate their faith, the parents must demonstrate to their children that their own faith is important to them. Bader and Desmond found this to be true in their study published in 2006:

The importance that parents attach to religion was significantly associated with how important children view religion. In fact, the importance parents attach to religion was a significant predictor of all four child religiosity measures (church attendance, importance of religion, frequency of prayer, and view of the Bible). These findings are consistent with much previous research on religious transmission.¹²³

While church attendance is one way that parents can display the importance they attach to their faith, Bader and Desmond found that by itself, church attendance does not suffice:

Parents who believe religion to be very important tend to have more religious kids, even if those parents do not attend church regularly...Parents who ascribe low importance to religion will be less likely to transmit religious behaviors and values to their children, even if the family attends church regularly.¹²⁴

It would seem to be difficult for parents to convince their children that the Lord is the top priority in their life if they only focus on him one hour per week. Such an impression is more successfully given when parents see to it that the Lord and his Word intersect with their lives throughout the week. The encouragement for families to conduct home devotions on a regular basis flows naturally from this observation. We may also note here that even if, during the family devotion time, the children seem bored or do not appear to be getting anything out of it, the parents are still sending a powerful message that God's Word is vitally important to their everyday lives. In the long run, this impression will not be lost on the children. The excuse that parents are unable to conduct the home devotion in a way that is meaningful to the children simply does not hold water when viewed in this light.

¹²¹ Okagaki et. al., "Socialization of Religious Beliefs," 291.

¹²² Van Kooten, *Building the Family Altar*, 115.

¹²³ Bader and Desmond, "Do As I Say," 324.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 325.

The third factor that Okagaki mentions as having an impact on the children's desire to imitate their parents' faith is agreement between father and mother on religion. Dean Hoge's study confirms this finding:

Jennings and Niemi had found mother-father agreement to be very important in political socialization, so we looked at mother-father religious agreement in the present study. We included measures on whether the parental marriage was religiously mixed or not; whether the children perceived their parents as arguing about religion; and whether the parents agreed on creedal assent, relativism, individualism, and devotionism. Only one measure was found to relate to value transmission – whether the parents agree on creedal assent.¹²⁵

This observation emphasizes how important it is for children to see that their parents agree on what they believe. Once again, such an impression can clearly be given as both father and mother regularly gather together around the Word of God for the family devotion time. This allows children to observe both father and mother actively agreeing on their faith.

The Accuracy of the Perceptions of Parents' Beliefs

It is not enough, however, for parents to simply instill in their children the desire to share their beliefs. If parents hope to successfully transmit their beliefs to their children, they must also ensure that their children's perceptions of their beliefs are accurate. The findings of Les Whitbeck's study support this statement: "Our results also corroborate previous research that shows that accurate perception of parents' values is positively related to parent-child value congruence...Quality of parent-child interaction alone appears to be insufficient to ensure value transmission. Children must also be aware of what their parents' values are."¹²⁶ This is the second general area Okagaki identified as influencing the degree to which children share their parents' beliefs.

In general, it can be said that parental interest and involvement in their children's religious development enables children to accurately perceive their parents' beliefs.¹²⁷ In

¹²⁵ Dean R. Hoge, Gregory H. Petrillo, and Ella I. Smith, "Transmission of Religious and Social Values from Parents to Teenage Children," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 44, no.3 (August 1982): 577.

¹²⁶ Les Whitbeck and Viktor Gecas, "Value Attributions and Value Transmission between Parents and Children," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 50, no.3 (August 1988): 839.

¹²⁷ Okagaki reports: "Our data demonstrated that the degree to which parents used multiple approaches to teach their children about their religious beliefs, supervised their children's religious development, wanted their

particular, Okagaki found that religious discussions between parents and children were especially important in this regard. "When the young adults were asked how they learned about their parents' beliefs, most of the responses fell into three categories: (1) discussions with their parents, (2) joint activities with their parents, and (3) observing what their parents did."¹²⁸ The article goes on to say that one-third of the responses fell under category one, while only one-fifth of the responses fell under category two and one-fifth under category three. To the degree that these findings are accurate and representative, the conclusion may be drawn that family devotions and informal religious discussions impact children's beliefs more than going to church (which might be classified under both category two and category three) and parental modeling of a Christian lifestyle (category three).¹²⁹ Okagaki further expands on this observation in her discussion of the data:

Analysis of young adults' spontaneous responses to how they learned about their parents' beliefs revealed that the most common response was learning through discussions with their parents. Parents explained their beliefs to their children, discussed what they were learning in their own reading of the Bible, and shared what they "took away" from church services. Parents engaged in faith-building activities with their children. In addition to taking their children to church, parents prayed with their children, took them along when they were doing volunteer work at church, and told the children Bible stories before they went to sleep at night.¹³⁰

Along with establishing good relationships with their children, then, parents also need to spend time talking to their children about their beliefs. This will ensure that the children receive an accurate perception of their parents' beliefs, thus increasing the likelihood that their children make those beliefs their own.

children to embrace their faith, and modeled participation in religious activities was positively related to how accurately young adults understood what their parents believed" (Okagaki et. al., "Socialization of Religious Beliefs," 291).

¹²⁸ Okagaki et. al., "Socialization of Religious Beliefs," 282.

¹²⁹ Parental modeling of a Christian lifestyle is, nonetheless, significant. Schwartz comments in her study: "The transmission model was strongly supported by the findings that both parent and friend modeling of faith behavior (e.g., showing faith by word and deed, consistency in how they live out their faith, etc.) is significantly predictive of adolescent religious faith. This resonates with the findings of others...that adolescents who witness in their parents consistent and powerful examples of Christian lifestyle and fellowship are more likely themselves to express a stronger belief in God, integration of faith and life, and participation in spiritual acts (Schwartz, "Transformations in Parent and Friend Faith Support," 321).

¹³⁰ Okagaki et. al., "Socialization of Religious Beliefs," 290.

In summary, then, the specific things that have been found to be important if parents hope to influence their children by passing their religious beliefs on to them are as follows:

- Healthy parent-child relationship
- Perception that religion is important to parents even outside of church
- Agreement between father and mother on religion
- The children's accurate knowledge of their parents' beliefs
- Parental interest and involvement in their child's religious development, which includes religious discussions

Although all of these objectives can be either met or assisted by a regular home devotion, this final bullet point most specifically supports their importance. Schwartz' study in particular found that children of parents who actively promoted their religious development by engaging them in religious discussions were most likely to imitate their parents' faith. She writes, "Beyond simply modeling church attendance and other religious practices, belief and commitment seem best nurtured by both fathers and mothers who allow their children to observe, discuss, and take active leadership in developing their own faith."¹³¹ In addition, religious discussions do not merely impact the children while they are still under their parents' roof, but in many cases they cause the children to carry their parents' beliefs into adulthood:

Likewise, the transaction model was also supported by the results, with both parent and friend faith dialogue (e.g., prayer, read and talk about Bible, etc.) accounting for significant variance in religious faith. This finding, too, is commensurate with previous research...in that participation in dyadic discussion about one's personal religious faith is positively associated with more active engagement with that subjective faith. The benefits of faith interaction to one's faith development may have more than just short-term consequences, as others (e.g., Boyatzis, 1996) have found such open discussion about religion to have predictive power beyond the adolescent years.¹³²

All of this is of course not to say that the Word of God is any less powerful at church than it is at home. The Lord's promise that his Word will not return to him empty still stands, regardless of the forum in which it is heard. This does recognize, however, that parents, by virtue of their God-given role, can lay this powerful Word of God on their children's hearts in a way that no one else is in a position to do. From there the Holy Spirit does his work.

¹³¹ Schwartz, "Transformations in Parent and Friend Faith Support," 313.

¹³² Ibid., 321.

In closing this section, we might mention the Biblical example of Isaac and Jacob to show how great of an influence parents can have on children. We read in Genesis chapter 25, “The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.”¹³³ Twelve chapters later, we see the effect that Isaac’s favoritism had on his son Jacob: “Now Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him.”¹³⁴ It seems that Jacob learned favoritism from his father Isaac, demonstrating how parents can have a great impact on their children, whether positive or negative.¹³⁵

Blessings to Expect

Although the commitment to starting a regular home devotional routine may be substantial, the Lord promises that it is well worth the effort. He promises that great blessings will come to all who read and study his Word. David declares, “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.”¹³⁶ In this section, we will consider some of the specific blessings that may result from making the Lord’s Word a regular fixture in our families.

Before we begin, however, it will be beneficial to warn against some improper motivations for beginning a devotional routine. Bivens mentions the twin dangers of moralism and Pharisaism.¹³⁷ If we suppose that gathering our families around God’s Word will in any way earn God’s favor, we have fallen into the pit of moralism. God’s favor has already been completely and entirely earned for us by Christ, and any attempts we make to earn it by our own

¹³³ Genesis 25:27,28

¹³⁴ Genesis 37:3

¹³⁵ Richard L. Gurgel, *Sharing the Promise with Our Children: A Workshop to Help Parents Build A Strong Christian Home* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), 9.

¹³⁶ Psalm 19:7,8

¹³⁷ Bivens, “Using Devotional Classics,” 11.

efforts betray a sinful attitude of self-righteousness. Likewise, if beginning a family devotional routine causes us to view ourselves as “upper-echelon Christians” while we look down upon the vast number of families who do not have such a practice, we have fallen into the pit of Pharisaism. Since we all have been saved by grace alone, the grounds for personal boasting of any kind have been removed.

A third danger Bivens warns us against is that of expecting visible blessings immediately. If we assume that we will quickly experience a radical change in our lives as a result of our new devotional endeavor, we are setting ourselves up for a major disappointment. The parable of the farmer who sowed seed in his field reminds us that while God’s Word is certainly powerful, it does not always produce results overnight.¹³⁸ Martin Luther’s comment here is instructive:

Hearing and handling the Word is always good and useful. For although the Word does not always strike home, our heart nonetheless remembers what it has heard and perhaps in an hour and at a time when we need it will begin really to understand it and feel its power and comfort. In like manner, embers which have lain under the ashes for a while will start burning again and give fire when one stirs them up and blows on them. Therefore the Word should not be considered powerless. One should not think that it has been preached in vain. Neither should another word be sought in case fruit does not appear immediately.¹³⁹

With a proper understanding of the incredible power of God’s Word and with realistic expectations of its effects, we consider the blessings we may expect from making use of it in our homes.

Heaven-Bound Family Members

First, we may expect the Word, specifically law and gospel, to build up family members who will hold on to the truths of the faith and so enter heaven. It has well been said that if we saw even a glimpse of hell, we would do everything in our power to keep those we love out of it. That’s where the Word of God comes into play. James says, “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save

¹³⁸ Mark 4:26-29

¹³⁹ Martin Luther, quoted in Arthur John Schulz, “The Proper Use of Scripture in Family Devotion,” (WLS Essay File, 1993): 8.

you.”¹⁴⁰ To forfeit this priceless blessing that God’s Word affords is unthinkable. Kremer comments:

Can you think of anything more valuable to you or the members of your family than life itself? Who would dare to be reckless with life or cavalier about its value? Yet we sometimes treat spiritual life with that attitude. And when we do, we are in great peril. Such an attitude can be deadly. The implications are long term. In fact, the implications are eternal and absolute. We must do something to find this life-giving water for ourselves and our families.¹⁴¹

Although getting their children into heaven should be parents’ number one goal, the devil is strangely successful at distracting parents from that goal. The things that many parents focus on today demonstrate this sad reality. Sports practices and games seem to be the card that trumps all other activities. Parents have a seemingly unlimited amount of hours to see to it that their children are trained in soccer, baseball, football, and basketball, but when it comes to training them in God’s Word, there never seems to be a spare minute. One begins to wonder whether Christian parents are more concerned with getting their children on the team than with getting them into heaven. There has never been a time in history when God’s Word has been so readily available for family use. The family that ignores that blessing, inadvertently or not, is ignoring the only tool they have to train each other for eternity. What greater purpose could there be for the family than to “help point one another heavenward?”¹⁴² The question Jesus poses is one we all must ponder: “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?”¹⁴³

Strangely enough, the desire to have well-behaved children is another obstacle that may cause parents to behave toward their children in ways that are inconsistent with the goal of getting them to heaven. While this desire is not bad in and of itself, it can quickly become detrimental to children’s faith if carried too far. James Moeller explains: “Are [parents] simply dressing their children down with the law? Or are they interested in true Christian discipline that is ultimately concerned about a child’s faith in the gospel?”¹⁴⁴ Certainly the law must be a

¹⁴⁰ James 1:21

¹⁴¹ Kremer, *From the Ground Up*, 23.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁴³ Mark 8:36

¹⁴⁴ James R. Moeller, “Influencing God’s Children (Leader’s Guide)” (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011): 10.

significant part of parents' spiritual repertoire, because all children are born with a sinful nature which can only respond to law. But if the law is the *only* spiritual tool that parents use on their children, they have omitted the only tool that can propel their children toward heaven – the gospel! Children's faith can be strengthened only if the harsh rebukes and punishments (or even rewards for good behavior) are followed up by the assurance of the unconditional forgiveness that is theirs through Jesus. Where this does not happen, parents have either lost sight of the larger goal of getting their children to heaven or they have forgotten how to reach that goal. Where the latter is the case, parents must remember that simply getting their children to *act* like Christians does not *make* them Christians. In fact, this approach could have a negative effect on the children's faith by making them think that their good behavior is the only way they can earn favor, either from their parents or from God.

Rather, as parents strive to make their children act like Christians, they must also strive to make them Christians, and the only way to do that is through the gospel. Family devotions will bring not only children, but also parents into contact with the gospel, reminding them of the way God deals with them in forgiveness and motivating them to show that same love and forgiveness toward their children. In that way, through their earthly mothers and fathers, children will learn by experience how their heavenly Father also deals with them.

The Scriptures have many examples of children who stayed close to the faith because of the influences they received at home. In many cases, Scripture does not give us many details about the specific ways that these children were reared at home in their formative years. Dobberstein points out, however, that "in an indirect way we learn much of the homes and of the parents of these heroes of faith. In them we find the values and virtues that God seeks in the hearts of men, values and virtues which, unless they are part of the early training of a child, are seldom learned."¹⁴⁵

Perhaps the most direct Biblical example of this blessing can be seen in the life of young pastor Timothy. Paul writes to him:

I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also...and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Dobberstein, "Scripture Speaks to the Family," 6.

¹⁴⁶ 2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15

With these words, Paul states that Timothy possessed saving faith because his mother and grandmother saw to it that he was brought up in the faith.

The Old Testament has other examples as well, such as that of Abraham and Isaac. We read in Genesis:

Abraham was now old and well advanced in years, and the LORD had blessed him in every way. He said to the chief servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh. I want you to swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.”¹⁴⁷

From these verses, one may certainly conclude that since Abraham was concerned about where his son would spend eternity, he insisted that Isaac marry a woman who would not lead him away from the Lord. This action is doubtless one of many that Abraham took in his household to keep Isaac close to the Lord. Four chapters later, we see the effects: “So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him and commanded him: ‘Do not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Paddan Aram, to the house of your mother’s father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother.’”¹⁴⁸ The spiritually rich environment Abraham provided for his son had a great impact, even causing Isaac to show the same concern over Jacob’s choice of a wife as Abraham had shown over his. Such concern is a clear fruit of the faith that Abraham had planted in Isaac’s heart.¹⁴⁹

Moving on to the end of Genesis, we meet Jacob’s son Joseph as a slave in the household of Potiphar, refusing the sexual advances of Potiphar’s wife. “How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?”¹⁵⁰ Joseph declares. Nothing but a love for the Lord learned in the home of his father Jacob could have given Joseph the strength to resist such a tantalizing temptation with such great resolve.¹⁵¹

The prophet Samuel offers us a similar example. We read in 1 Samuel chapter 1:

¹⁴⁷ Genesis 24:1-4

¹⁴⁸ Genesis 28:1,2

¹⁴⁹ Gurgel, *Sharing the Promise*, 9.

¹⁵⁰ Genesis 39:9

¹⁵¹ Schmiege, “A Biblical Look at Bible Study,” 8.

There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite... Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD.¹⁵²

Two things are striking about these verses. First, we learn that Samuel's father, Elkanah, was a devout believer who made it a point to appear before the Lord at the tabernacle in Shiloh year after year. It is not a stretch to assume that Samuel was influenced by this devotion also at home, especially when we consider how devoted Samuel's mother Hannah was to the Lord as well.¹⁵³ Second, we learn that the priests of the Lord at this time were Hophni and Phinehas, two of the most corrupt and immoral priests Israel had ever seen. When later we learn that Hannah dropped Samuel off at the tabernacle as a young boy, we might well wonder if the evil influences of Hophni and Phinehas would corrupt young Samuel. Neither is it reassuring that Samuel was under the primary headship of Eli.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, we read that "the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men."¹⁵⁵ Clearly, the Lord's protective hand was upon Samuel as he grew up amongst so many godless influences. Yet Lange holds that the spiritual training Samuel received at home should not be discounted:

Hannah did not have much time with Samuel—at most three to six years. That is considerably less time than most parents have with their children. While God gives us no specifics, it is safe to assume that Hannah wasted no time in training Samuel to know the Lord. She did not wait until he was older and better able to understand what she told him. She taught Samuel early and well. And that early training served Samuel well throughout his life.¹⁵⁶

The lesson to be learned from people like Joseph and Samuel is that a strong spiritual foundation laid in the home gives children the needed strength to reject Satan when he seeks to lure them away from the Lord.

¹⁵² 1 Samuel 1:1,3

¹⁵³ 1 Samuel 1:11: "And [Hannah] made a vow, saying, 'O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.'"

¹⁵⁴ The Lord highlights Eli's failures as a spiritual head in 1 Samuel 3:13: "For I told [Eli] that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them."

¹⁵⁵ 1 Samuel 2:26

¹⁵⁶ Lange, "Families of the Bible," 41-42.

Church history also gives us an encouraging example of this at the time of the Reformation. Nikolaus Herman was a layman who wrote hymns for children and families in the village of Joachimsthal. The hymns in the book he published, *The Sunday Gospels*, became so well known in the village that when the Catholic counter-reformation came to Joachimsthal, the people refused to compromise their beliefs or attend Catholic services. Jerry Gernander writes:

The people sustained their Lutheran faith by reading the Bible, singing hymns, and conducting devotional services in their homes...When force finally was exerted upon the populace by the Catholic officials, a grand total of nine people capitulated. The girls had grown up to be mothers and grandmothers who trained their own children so well that the laypeople were able to resist false doctrine and persecution even without [Lutheran] pastors present. This was a triumph of Luther's belief in what a layperson armed with Scripture could do, and how the royal priesthood could declare the praises of Christ. It is a reminder of the quiet, unnoticed victories of the Gospel through the means of grace, not only in the church service, but also in catechetical instruction, the singing of hymns and family devotions.¹⁵⁷

There is nothing parents could want more for their children than that they spend their eternity in heaven, and there is no better way for them to give that gift to their children than by regularly feeding their children's faith at home with the gospel.

Children who Exhibit Christian Behaviors

Although parents' desire to have well-behaved children can be detrimental to children's faith if carried too far, parents may reasonably anticipate improvement in this area as they regularly expose their children to the gospel at home. It would of course be a gross overstatement to promise that children will become angels if parents conduct home devotions. However, it is not unreasonable to expect that the more children understand the unconditional love, forgiveness, and blessings that God freely showers upon them through Jesus, the more they will respond to that love with fruits of faith. Jesus promises as much when he says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit."¹⁵⁸ In his study of Seventh-day Adventist youth, grades 6 through 12, Jerry Lee reports:

¹⁵⁷ Jerry Gernander, "Lessons from the Laypeople of the Reformation: Lecture I – Laymen and Women of the Reformation," (Reformation Lectures at Bethany Lutheran College, 2011): 13.

¹⁵⁸ John 15:5

The data show that worship patterns in which (family) worship occurs frequently and in which youth are actively involved in (family) worship are associated with positive youth outcomes. Lowered concern for material things and lowered alcohol and drug use occurred in two of the three groups with frequent worship in which youth were actively involved. Active faith, including reported helping of others, was higher in all three of the groups in which youth frequently read, prayed, and talked about God during family worship.¹⁵⁹

Children who receive a love for God's Word from their parents will certainly grow up to be wonderful blessings in service to God's church. Perhaps in special cases, the Word will even work in a child's heart as it did in the heart of young pastor Timothy, prompting him or her to enter the public ministry and so serve God's church in a larger capacity.

Proper Perspective on Worldly Pleasures

Sadly, Kremer notes that many families today have "traded in the astonishing surprise of being free from the eternal grip of sin, death, and Satan's power for human pleasures."¹⁶⁰ Rather than seeking satisfaction in fleeting worldly pleasures, home devotions give families the chance to regularly focus on the only thing that can truly bring lasting joy – Jesus and the salvation he has won for us. This alone can give purpose and meaning to life.¹⁶¹ May Christian homes never be choked by the thorns Jesus describes in the Parable of the Sower, "The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it."¹⁶² Rather, as we concern ourselves with following Jesus and keep our eyes fixed on him, Jesus promises us a life that is full and abundant.¹⁶³ As families conduct regular home devotions, Jesus frees them from an unhealthy preoccupation with obtaining the momentary pleasures of this world.

¹⁵⁹ Jerry W. Lee, Gail T. Rice, and V. Bailey Gillespie, "Family Worship Patterns and their Correlation with Adolescent Behavior and Beliefs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no.3 (1997): 380.

¹⁶⁰ Kremer, "Home Sweet Home," 12.

¹⁶¹ Gurgel, *Sharing the Promise*, 21.

¹⁶² Matthew 13:22

¹⁶³ John 10:10b: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

Family Support System

In his wisdom and love, God placed people into families for mutual love and support. Sadly, sin shattered God's beautiful design. Kremer comments, "No wonder the perfect family seems like such an empty promise! Sin envelopes us, attacks us, overpowers us, and destroys us. It lives inside our hearts. Because of it, the whole human family writhes in hopelessness and despair...God alone has the resources powerful enough to heal our shattered relationships."¹⁶⁴ This resource, the unconditional love and forgiveness God proclaims to us in the gospel, alone has the power to transform families characterized by strife into families characterized by loving support. Only when family members have been touched with the unconditional love of God can they begin to show such unconditional love toward each other.

A cure is needed to break the perpetual cycle found in hurting families. An individual who has been loved only conditionally needs to experience unconditional love in order to feel lovable enough to give love and to support others. The breakthrough comes when one receives God's unconditional love. Being cherished by God gives a sense of self-worth and a new self-perception ("I am loveable"). Drawing on the Holy Spirit and maturing in the faith, the individual now has reason to follow God's paradigm and to adopt healing behaviors.¹⁶⁵

The apostle John sums this up simply and beautifully: "We love because he first loved us."¹⁶⁶ Three specific areas of family life in which families may anticipate improvement are forgiveness, encouragement, and support.

"In a family based on law, the members demand perfection of one another. Rules and regulations are rigidly set to govern relationships. This kind of pressure for flawlessness adds guilt to the failure that is inevitable in such a situation."¹⁶⁷ Simply put, a family cannot hope to be a nurturing environment for its hurting members if forgiveness is not practiced. Family members will sin against each other all the time. The cycle of love will be broken at many parts. If the family's motivation to love each other is based off of the individual family members, it will fail. "There must be a willingness to forgive if right relationships are going to develop in family

¹⁶⁴ Kremer, *From the Ground Up*, 12-13.

¹⁶⁵ Balswick, *The Family*, 35.

¹⁶⁶ 1 John 4:19

¹⁶⁷ Balswick, *The Family*, 27.

life."¹⁶⁸ Paul tells families exactly where they must look to muster this willingness: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, *just as in Christ God forgave you.*"¹⁶⁹ "Although forgiveness may seem quite an outrageous idea from the human point of view, with God's strength and mercy it is not only possible, but it will also prove to be exactly what is needed to bring transforming power to anguished lives."¹⁷⁰

An unwillingness to forgive offenses is not the only barrier standing in the way of a familial environment of support. A second barrier is the desire to build oneself up at the expense of others. Often this takes the form of ridiculing a family member for weaknesses and failures, or ignoring or minimizing the achievements of other family members by drawing attention to one's own greater achievements. Such a self-centered attitude breaks the bonds of family support and destroys the potential for close relationships. "Building intimacy in family relationships is one of the most important yet one of the most difficult tasks to do well. Sharing honestly about what is going on internally places one in a vulnerable position. Therefore, the family must be a safe place for members to share themselves."¹⁷¹

Paul describes to Titus the only thing that can break such malicious self-centeredness:

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.¹⁷²

Not only did Christ save us from sin, death, and hell, he also saved us from our state of sinful self-absorption. No longer must family members strive to grab power for themselves; no longer must they prove their worth to each other. Christ has already proven their infinite worth when he faced hell to save them. Confident in their worth, then, family members can stop striving to build themselves up and start striving to build each other up. Only through the gospel can families

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 26.

¹⁶⁹ Ephesians 4:31,32

¹⁷⁰ Balswick, *The Family*, 295.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 239.

¹⁷² Titus 3:3-5

cultivate such an environment of encouragement. Only through the gospel can families accept each other's differences rather than ridicule them.

A third barrier standing in the way of familial support is an apathetic disinterest in anyone's problems but one's own. Family members may not only feel unable to share their problems with each other because they fear ridicule, but also because they fear a lack of concern. Since our society has become so impersonal, however, the need to share problems and frustrations with empathetic listeners is greater now than ever.

Mass society in a computer-driven world is characterized by specialization of tasks coordinated by social structures. Bureaucracies place people into neat, categorical relationships, and the individual's rights and responsibilities are defined in terms of one's position in the organizational chain of command. As a result, we begin to treat one another as objects occupying a position rather than as human personalities. We become part of a faceless crowd, recognized and treated as mere numbers...In the face of this heartless world, the family becomes a refuge where we hope to find comfort, care, and intimacy.¹⁷³

As the gospel produces the willingness to put forth effort to serve one another, the home devotion time also provides family members with an opportunity to set aside their own needs and listen to each other's needs, thus promoting the desired family support system. Loren Marks' studies have also found this to be true:

Recent qualitative work including Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families has revealed that these faiths include practices that reportedly promote a sense of closeness with each other and with God (Dollahite & Marks, 2005; Marks, 2004). Such practices include saying grace for Protestant Christians, offering novenas (prayers centered on gratitude) for Catholic Christians, family home evening for Latter-day Saint Christians, the Shabbat meal and accompanying ritual for Jewish families, and the Ramadan fast for Muslims.¹⁷⁴

Regardless of the religion involved, time spent together indeed "promotes a sense of closeness with each other." This is another reason I recommend below that families begin the devotion time by asking each individual family member to share high points and low points from their day.

A family support system can only be achieved when family members forgive instead of retaliate, encourage instead of tear down, and take time to bear each other's burdens instead of remain apathetically self-centered. As we have seen, the gospel is the only tool that has the

¹⁷³ Balswick, *The Family*, 240.

¹⁷⁴ Loren Marks, "Religion and Family Relational Health: An Overview and Conceptual Model," *Journal of Religion and Health* 45, no.4 (Winter 2006): 608.

power to effect positive change in these areas. Therefore, if the family hopes to achieve an atmosphere of support, it must ensure that its members come together to have regular contact with the gospel. While sin may make progress in this area slow and difficult, the family can proceed with confidence and expect growth because of Christ's promise: "If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit."¹⁷⁵

Healthy Marriages

Another area that home devotions may likely improve is the marriage relationship between husband and wife. The reasons for this are the same as in the previous section. Forgiveness, encouragement, and support are vital components in any relationship, but especially in the intimate marital relationship. Lee writes, "Dudley and Kosinski (1990) reported family worship was one of several strong predictors of marital satisfaction. Earlier, Gruner (1985) had reported an association of marital adjustment with frequency of prayer and Bible reading in four religious groups."¹⁷⁶

Comfort in Troubles

While the home devotion time may certainly provide family members with the opportunity to support each other in their troubles, the most important support the devotional time offers will of course come from God's Word. "The Scriptures assure us again and again that God does indeed love us, no matter how severe the storm or sharp the pain."¹⁷⁷ Such assurances are necessary, because often the circumstances of life seem to argue the exact opposite point.

Balswick states,

Like the disciples who asked why the man whom Jesus was about to heal had been born blind, families today often ask similar agonizing questions about their pain...We need a belief in God that gives meaning and a perspective to help us survive and eventually get

¹⁷⁵ John 15:5

¹⁷⁶ Lee et. al., "Family Worship Patterns," 372.

¹⁷⁷ Kremer, *From the Ground Up*, 56.

beyond the pain. We need to feel God's compassionate presence suffering with us and lighting the way through our darkest hours.¹⁷⁸

Even though God's Word provides the most important support, people still have a vital role in bringing that comfort from God's Word to hurting souls. Paul says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."¹⁷⁹ God's Word does not merely come to us on paper, but through the words of our brothers and sisters in Christ. How much more comforting is it, then, when these words come through the members of one's earthly family as well!

Greater Confidence in Sharing Faith with Others

As family members become more comfortable talking about Jesus at home, they will be better equipped to vocalize their faith outside the home. Many Christians are uncomfortable sharing their faith simply because they are unaccustomed to talking about spiritual matters and feel inadequate doing so. This is an obstacle that a home devotion can help to overcome. In an even more direct way, the home devotion could be a powerful tool to reach out as a family if the family should invite guests over for supper. If suppertime is the designated time for the devotion, the family could simply proceed as usual, inviting the guests to listen if they desire.

Equips Parents for "Teachable Moments"

Formal Bible readings and published devotionals that are read at a set time are certainly effective ways of bringing God's Word to children. Yet many times, the most valuable opportunities to talk about God happen unexpectedly and informally. Educators call these "teachable moments," moments that just arise in the day-to-day events of the child's life. A failed test, a bully, a lie, a walk out in nature, or a sickness or death in the family are all opportunities for parents to bring God's Word to bear in practical, real-life scenarios. We recall Schwartz' findings quoted above:

¹⁷⁸ Balswick, *The Family*, 294.

¹⁷⁹ 2 Corinthians 1:3,4

Likewise, the transaction model was also supported by the results, with both parent and friend faith dialogue (e.g., prayer, read and talk about Bible, etc.) accounting for significant variance in religious faith. This finding, too, is commensurate with previous research...in that participation in dyadic discussion about one's personal religious faith is positively associated with more active engagement with that subjective faith. The benefits of faith interaction to one's faith development may have more than just short-term consequences, as others (e.g., Boyatzis, 1996) have found such open discussion about religion to have predictive power beyond the adolescent years."¹⁸⁰

As parents discuss God in the informal events of their children's lives, they teach their children that God and his Word are not just to be confined to church or to a specific devotion time, but are to be an integral part of every aspect of their lives. This is likely why "open discussion about religion" has been found "to have predictive power beyond the adolescent years."

Parents should not, however, conclude that the formal home devotion is superfluous. If speaking about God's Word is not made intentional, it often does not happen. What is more, the informal times will naturally flow from the formal times, because God's Word will be in recent memory. When faced with a situation, parents (or even children) may recall a truth from the devotional time and apply it to what is at hand. Van Kooten comments:

If constructive conversation is stifled, as though one's spiritual life is a private matter, everyone will begin to look upon conversation about the deeper religious and moral issues of life as abnormal, and even as an intrusion upon one's privacy. *This is the crisis in communication that the family altar should help to overcome* (emphasis mine).¹⁸¹

Unexpected Blessings

Finally, any attempt at a comprehensive list of blessings that may result when a family gathers around God's Word is doomed from the start, because God's blessings know no bounds. Paul writes:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be

¹⁸⁰ Schwartz, "Transformations in Parent and Friend Faith Support," 321.

¹⁸¹ Van Kooten, *Building the Family Altar*, 114.

glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!
Amen.¹⁸²

Paul prays that, through the Spirit's working, God would pour out his rich blessings on the Christians in Ephesus. The foremost blessing Paul has in mind is Christ's loving and gracious rule in the hearts of believers, and Paul prays that the Ephesians be able to understand just how comprehensive and sufficient this love of Christ is in every circumstance of their lives. And yet, no matter how greatly God's Word has expanded our concept of Christ's love, no matter how far our imaginations have run with the blessings that are ours because of it, Paul says that God is still able to do "immeasurably more." As the power of his gospel continues to work in our hearts, there is no telling what blessings God may choose to pour into our lives. It is as if God were saying to us, "I have so many surprises waiting for you when you make my Word a part of your life, and I cannot wait for you to discover them!" Such a promise from our God is reason enough for us to meditate on his words, not only individually, but also with the members of our family.¹⁸³

Following Jesus' Will

In the end, the real motivation for Christians to make God's Word a regular part of their homes is not a selfish expectation of personal benefit or reward, nor is it a sense of obligation to fulfill a divine command. Rather, the motivation comes from the knowledge that this is the will of our loving Savior, who promises to meet us in his Word with blessings he wants us to have.¹⁸⁴

Tony Jones writes:

The funny thing is, I can't really tell you why [devotional disciplines] are helpful. I know they work because they have for me, but I'm still confounded by their effectiveness. Maybe it's because the ancient spiritual disciplines cause us to slow down and shut up, something at which most of us are not very good. Maybe it's that there's something mystical and mysterious about these ancient rites, like we're tapping into some

¹⁸² Ephesians 3:14-21

¹⁸³ Gurgel, *Sharing the Promise*, 34.

¹⁸⁴ John 15:5-8: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and *my words remain in you*, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

pretechnological, preindustrial treasury of the Spirit. But I think they work because of Jesus. I'm afraid you're not going to get much more explanation from me than that...Christians engage in these spiritual practices not out of duty or obligation but because there is a promise attached: God will personally meet us in the midst of these disciplines.¹⁸⁵

In his essay, Schultz compares the blessings of studying God's Word with the nourishment we receive from food. "We normally eat three meals a day, but we draw nourishment from these meals during the whole day. Most of us don't understand how our bodily systems work together to keep us healthy and vigorous, but they do."¹⁸⁶ Just because we do not understand exactly how our bodily processes turn food into energy for daily living does not mean that we stop eating food altogether. In the same way, it would be illogical to go without the spiritual nourishment that God's Word provides just because we do not understand exactly how that Word keeps our souls healthy and alive. We have Christ's promise that it does,¹⁸⁷ and that is enough!

Obstacles to Overcome

After considering cultural influences, God's plan for the instruction of children in Scripture, the consequences that result when that plan is ignored and the blessings that come when it is followed, the great influence they have on their children, and the many blessings of conducting home devotions, parents may develop a God-given motivation to begin family devotions in their home. However, even with this desire, the battle is not completely won. Satan will do everything in his power to make people think that studying God's Word in their home is impractical, impossible, and unrealistic. He will seek to throw as many obstacles as possible into the minds and lives of Christian parents to prevent them from implementing home devotions. In this section, therefore, we will consider some common obstacles and objections that arise and consider how, with God's help, these obstacles can be overcome.

Perceived Lack of Time

¹⁸⁵ Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2005), 17-18, quoted in Bivens, "Using Devotional Classics," 15.

¹⁸⁶ Schulz, "The Proper Use of Scripture," 3.

¹⁸⁷ John 6:63: "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."

In today's fast-paced world where a seemingly endless amount of commitments and activities jockey for our precious time, a perceived lack of time may very well be the biggest obstacle families must overcome if they hope to begin home devotions. It may seem impossible to add even one more activity to a schedule that is already bursting at the seams. In response to this objection, Gurgel asks us to think not in terms of adding, but of subtracting:

To what in your schedule must you say "No!" if you are going to have time for sharing the gospel promises with your children? If you have trouble saying "No!" remember this: We are always saying "No!" to some things in our schedule. Since our "plate" can only hold so much, every time we say "Yes!" to one thing something else gets shoved off our plate. We are really not just talking about adding to our schedules when we speak of sharing the Gospel promises with our families. We are talking about subtracting.¹⁸⁸

In a word, therefore, the solution to a perceived lack of time for family devotions is prioritization. Parents who have become convinced of the importance of bringing Christ into the home should be able to identify other less important activities from which time can be subtracted. When parents do not take this time to prioritize their schedules in light of God's Word, the sinful world will rush to arrange their schedules according to its own priorities. Gurgel notes,

There will always be more things to do than there is time to do them. It all boils down to prioritizing our time for what is most important for us. It comes down to setting the priorities for our lives instead of letting the unbelieving world and the pressures of life set them for us...If we do not prayerfully and carefully set the priorities of our lives, by default the unbelieving world will squeeze their priorities into our lives.¹⁸⁹

A 2010 study conducted by the United States Department of Labor on how Americans use their time revealed that "watching TV was the leisure activity that occupied the most time (2.7 hours per day), accounting for about half of leisure time, on average, for those age 15 and over."¹⁹⁰ This finding alone suggests a natural activity from which time could be subtracted in order to make time for God's Word.

Television, however, is not the only activity that is eligible to be shortened in order to make time for a home devotion. God's Word is a priority that should supersede all activities,

¹⁸⁸ Gurgel, *Sharing the Promise*, 24.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 23,25.

¹⁹⁰ "American Time Use Survey Summary," 22 June 2011, United States Department of Labor, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htm> (accessed February 18, 2012).

even the constructive and wholesome ones. Jesus' words to Martha are words that all parents must consider carefully. When Martha's sister Mary abandoned her housework to listen to Jesus, Martha became upset with Mary for making her do all the work. "'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her.'"¹⁹¹ In this vein, John Piper warns that even positive activities can become negative if they displace God's Word:

The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison, but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but our endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the X-rated video, but the prime-time dribble of triviality we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of His love, it is a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife (Luke 14:18-20). The greatest adversary of love to God is not His enemies, but His gifts. The most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. When these replace an appetite for God Himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable and almost incurable.¹⁹²

Piper's words also echo God's own in Deuteronomy, where the Lord warns his people against an unholy preoccupation with his good gifts that would diminish their devotion to him.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.¹⁹³

If parents feel a strong allurements towards the many activities this world offers, the writer of Ecclesiastes puts these into perspective. He writes:

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. . . . Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Luke 10:41,42

¹⁹² John Piper, *A Hunger for God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 14, quoted in Wright, *Raising Kids to Love Jesus*, 176.

¹⁹³ Deuteronomy 6:10-12

¹⁹⁴ Ecclesiastes 2:4-6,8,11

If one's priority is chasing after worldly treasures and pleasures and not God's Word, his life will ultimately turn out to be meaningless.

To conclude this section, we turn to Genesis: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day."¹⁹⁵ When God finished creating the world, everything he had created was perfect, including the amount of time there was in a day. The problem is not that God has failed to give us enough time. The problem is that we are filling our time with things that are of little value!

Perceived Insignificance to Everyday Life

Even when parents do overcome the time barrier by making room in their schedules for home devotions, the devil will not give up. He will try to sabotage that devotional time by making parents think that home devotions are just a pointless religious exercise that give no real benefit to their lives. Van Kooten compares the way some people view the Bible with the way they might view grandma: "She's great and all, and we'll listen to her tell her stories, but she's just out of touch with the way we live today."¹⁹⁶

The Lord exposes this fallacy for the lie that it is. The book of Psalms begins by painting a beautiful picture of the man who makes God's Word his delight:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.¹⁹⁷

Scripture is full of other such passages that highlight just how significant and powerful God's Word is to work in our lives, both before and after our conversion.¹⁹⁸ To say that God's Word is

¹⁹⁵ Genesis 1:31

¹⁹⁶ Van Kooten, *Building the Family Altar*, 35.

¹⁹⁷ Psalm 1:1-2

¹⁹⁸ Romans 1:16: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the *power of God* for the salvation of everyone who believes." 1 Peter 1:23: "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the *living and enduring word of God*." Hebrews 4:12: "For *the word of God is living and active*. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Isaiah 55:11: "So is my word that goes out from my mouth. *It will not return to me empty*, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All

unable to make a real difference in our lives is to blatantly reject the very things God says about his Word. Lest we imagine, however, that God's Word will work as suddenly and explosively as dynamite, we do well to remember Luther's comment quoted above: "Although the Word does not always strike home, our heart nonetheless remembers what it has heard and perhaps in an hour and at a time when we need it will begin really to understand it and feel its power and comfort...Therefore the Word should not be considered powerless."¹⁹⁹

False Notion of the Church's and/or School's Total Sufficiency in Children's Spiritual Education

Satan may tempt families to deem home devotions unnecessary by planting the false notion that the church and/or the school are sufficient to handle the entire spiritual education of their children without them. The previous section on parental influence, however, gives evidence of parental indispensability in the spiritual training of the child. If the child receives the impression that religion is only a one-hour ritual on Sunday or just another school subject like math or science, parents should not be surprised if that child treats religion lightly later in life. Schmiede writes, "The home exerts the strongest and most effectual influence on the child. It does this because the influence is continuous. There is no institution that can take the place of the family, and there is no influence so effective and telling as the influence of the home."²⁰⁰

Parents who leave the spiritual training of their children to the church or school must also realize that they are not only exerting a neutral influence on their children's concept of religion, but also a negative influence. If parents teach their children nothing about Jesus in the home, they are teaching, by default, that he has no place in real life. John Price explains:

Education goes on in every home and all the time, and that of the most abiding and effective kind. Members of the family are teaching each other constantly. The children inevitably learn from the parents, and the parents pass on to the children practically all that they have known and experienced in human living. Religion, or the lack of religion,

Scripture is God-breathed and is *useful* for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, *so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped* for every good work."

¹⁹⁹ Martin Luther, quoted in Arthur John Schulz, "The Proper Use of Scripture in Family Devotion," (WLS Essay File, 1993): 8.

²⁰⁰ Schmiede, "A Biblical Look at Bible Study," 12.

is unavoidably passed on to the children. The home was the first school and continues to be the most vital and real school in the lives of human beings.²⁰¹

The parents, however, may not be the only ones to blame for this false notion. Ronald Heins explains:

Parents have been told repetitively from pulpit and in written material to see themselves as God's instrument for the spiritual training of their children. When children reach school age, however, our church in its systems tends to say with its policies and procedures "OK, we'll take over from here." In fact, as homes have deteriorated over the past 20 years school programs have proliferated attempting, in some cases consciously, to compensate for the lack of parental activity. We have reached a point where most have now realized the error of this separation.²⁰²

The church, of course, should have a formal plan to train its children by means of Sunday school, confirmation classes, and Bible studies. However, it should never give the impression that these programs can take the place of the parents at home. Sadly, the post-confirmation drop-out rate in many churches may indicate that this impression is too often given. Parents must be encouraged to view the church as a partner that helps them, not replaces them, in their role of tending to their children's spiritual welfare.

Parents Feel Incompetent

Although parents may see the value in home devotions and even desire to carry them out, they may feel unable or ill-equipped to lead them. Perhaps they think that they do not know enough about the Bible or that they are poor readers or that they will be unable to answer the questions that their children may ask. Schulz replies to these fears in this way: "Christian parents need to know that God does not check their worship for good grammar or eloquent speech. He desires their hearts and true faith."²⁰³

In addressing the Christian congregation at Rome, Paul writes, "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to

²⁰¹ John Price, *A Survey of Religious Education* (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1959), 351, quoted in Schmiede, *A Biblical Look at Bible Study*, 13.

²⁰² Ronald Heins, "The Shared Ministry," (WLS Essay File, 1988): 2.

²⁰³ Schulz, "The Proper Use of Scripture," 6.

instruct one another."²⁰⁴ These words are striking considering the fact that Paul is writing to first-generation Christians who were relatively new to the faith. What is more, at the time Paul wrote those words, he had not even visited Rome. His knowledge about this congregation came mainly from reports that others had given him. Nevertheless, Paul still states his firm conviction that they are "competent to instruct one another." One can conclude, therefore, that competency to instruct each other in spiritual matters is not determined by a superior knowledge of the Bible. The Christians at Rome were not competent because they were renowned theologians, but because they had faith. God-given faith in Christ is what qualifies a person to instruct others. Paul says elsewhere in his second letter to the Corinthians, "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant."²⁰⁵ Kremer writes:

God doesn't expect parents to be theologians. But he does give us the important responsibility of nurturing family members. We become more confident in doing that through daily practice. And, as our confidence grows, we become more willing to take risks, bringing an openness and honesty to family discussions.²⁰⁶

If one were to make a top-ten list of the greatest teachers God's people had ever known, Moses would have to be near the top of the list. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were constantly quoting the books Moses had written as authoritative teaching from God. And yet Exodus makes it clear that God did not choose Moses to lead his people because of his impressive qualifications. Moses could hardly have portrayed himself as any more weak or incompetent when God called him at the burning bush:

Moses said to the LORD, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." The LORD said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."²⁰⁷

Even though Moses was not an eloquent speaker, God did fulfill his promise to Moses by giving him the strength to confront Pharaoh. What is more, at the end of Moses' life, God used him to

²⁰⁴ Romans 15:14

²⁰⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:5-6

²⁰⁶ Kremer, *From the Ground Up*, 73.

²⁰⁷ Exodus 4:10-12

preach the longest sermon recorded in the Bible, the book of Deuteronomy. Moses is an excellent example to us of the comforting truth that God does not call the equipped, but rather he equips the called. As we have seen, God has clearly called the parents to be the primary spiritual educators of their children. Parents can confidently expect, therefore, that God has equipped them to carry out that task, even if they are not great theologians. "God does not give children only to Bible experts,"²⁰⁸ Kremer notes. Richard Foster echoes that sentiment:

We must not be led to believe that the Disciplines are for spiritual giants and hence beyond our reach, or for contemplatives who devote all their time to prayer and meditation. Far from it. God intends the Disciplines of the spiritual life to be for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who must wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, the Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our normal daily activities. If they are to have any transforming effect, the effect must be found in the ordinary junctures of human life: in our relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors.²⁰⁹

Although parents would need nothing more than their God-given faith to be competent to instruct their children, God has equipped them in another very practical way through the great variety of available devotional material. These resources give parents exactly what they need to begin a devotional routine in their homes, and they remove much of the anxiety involved when a parent who is generally unfamiliar with the Bible contemplates leading the family in studying its complexities. More details about devotional materials will be discussed later.

Parents have no Devotional Model to Follow from their Childhood

Parents may feel that they are unable to conduct home devotions with their families because their own parents did not give them an example of how they were to be done. Many of the same comments from the previous section also apply here, however, one passage from 1 Corinthians may also be considered. After encouraging the Corinthians to glorify God in everything they did and to seek the good of others so that they may be saved, Paul says, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."²¹⁰ Because most of the Corinthians did not grow

²⁰⁸ Kremer et. al., "Families Under God," 8.

²⁰⁹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 1, quoted in Bivens, "Using Devotional Classics," 15.

²¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:1

up in Christian households, Paul holds himself out as an example for them to follow. In the same way, parents have many great Scriptural examples of men and women who were faithful spiritual teachers for their children, as we have seen above. What is more, even within their own Christian community, parents can receive advice and inspiration from those who already have a devotional routine established in their home.

Perceived Sufficiency of Biblical Knowledge

On one end of the spectrum, parents may be intimidated by the prospect of home devotions because they know too little about the Bible. On the other end of the spectrum, parents may be unconcerned about conducting home devotions because they feel that they and their family already know enough about the Bible. Perhaps mother, father, and children were all blessed with such a solid education in God's Word that further study seems repetitive and redundant.

There are many Bible passages that point to the need for continual growth in God's Word for everyone, even pastors who spend their lives studying God's Word.²¹¹ And yet the purpose for studying God's Word goes beyond having a comprehensive knowledge of what God says. Bivens writes, "Spiritual growth is not the result of mastering 'what God says.' It is being mastered by God with the Spirit molding and shaping our spirit as he wills."²¹² The person who refuses to read God's Word on the grounds that they already know what it says is like a person who refuses to eat food because they already know what it tastes like. The Bible is not like any other book that can be mastered and put away. Its words are God's own, living and active, which alone can keep our souls alive.

Difficulty of Assembling the Entire Family at One Time

²¹¹ 2 Timothy 3:14,16-17: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of...All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." 2 Peter 3:18: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."

²¹² Forrest Bivens, "Spiritual Renewal as Expressed in the Christian's Life" (WLS Essay File, 1987): 16.

If there was a time when the norm for supper was to gather the entire family around the table and eat together at the same time every evening, it would appear that time has passed. While this may still be the case for some families, it is unrealistic for many others. It has become increasingly difficult in our busy society to find any time when the whole family is available to participate in a home devotion. This may be a great obstacle that would prevent a family from even attempting to begin a devotional routine.

To overcome such an obstacle, the first step is to examine priorities. Are the activities that are preventing the members of the family from coming together legitimate and unavoidable, or do these activities reflect misplaced priorities? Is it truly more important for children to constantly be running to sports practices and games than it is for them to be in regular contact with the Word of God? Parents must wrestle with questions like these in order to determine if scheduling conflicts are truly unavoidable. Even if there is not a time that would work every day, there might be a few times per week when every family member could find a time that works.

If it is truly impossible, however, to gather the entire family together at a single time, then the devotion should be done at a time when the majority of people can be present. Jesus himself says, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."²¹³ Family devotions are too important to abandon simply because one or two people are missing. Perhaps as the family devotion becomes a regular fixture in the home, schedules can be rearranged accordingly in the future.

Inability to Communicate with Family Members

In certain cases, the family may find it impossible to communicate with each other because of deep-seeded anger, resentment, or other psychological issues. This is admittedly difficult. If the family finds it impossible to talk about sensitive matters in Scripture's light because the issues are too painful or complex, the best way for the family to improve their spiritual well-being would be to seek Christian counseling from their pastor to begin to overcome the tension that divides them.

Presence of a non-Christian Spouse

²¹³ Matthew 18:20

It is simply a reality in this sinful world that some spouses will find themselves in a marriage where their husband or wife is an unbeliever. Perhaps the believer went into the marriage assuming that they could convert the unbeliever, or perhaps one spouse became a Christian later on while the other did not. Such an arrangement, however, should not deter the Christian spouse from initiating home devotions on their own, especially if the unbelieving spouse is neutral or open to the idea. This is a wonderful opportunity for the believing spouse to “shine like stars in the universe” while “holding out the word of life.”²¹⁴ The situation becomes more complicated if the unbelieving spouse actively resists the implementation of a devotional routine in the family. In such circumstances, the believing spouse should constantly bring the matter before God in prayer and seek to do whatever they can to raise the children in the Lord, remembering the apostle Peter’s directive: “Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.”²¹⁵

Indifference

Many of the obstacles listed above may be legitimate barriers that families need to overcome. Many of these obstacles, however, may also be mere excuses or symptoms reflecting a deeper problem that lies in the dark recesses of the sinful human heart – indifference. When it comes to God’s Word, however, indifference is deadly. The Lord despises a spiritual *laissez-faire* attitude no less than he despises a heart that is in open rebellion against him. Such indifference must be met by God’s passionate anger against it. Jesus says to the church in Laodicea, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”²¹⁶ Again the Lord says to the people of Judah through the prophet Zephaniah:

²¹⁴ Philippians 2:15,16

²¹⁵ 1 Peter 3:1-2

²¹⁶ Revelation 3:15-16

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, “The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad.” Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine.²¹⁷

Only after the law has done its work can the gospel once again breathe comfort, healing, and spiritual passion back into stone-cold hearts.

How to Get Started

Once the family has understood the importance of home devotions and, with God’s help, has overcome the obstacles standing in their way, they are ready to begin! What follows are specific suggestions to help the family get off to a good start.

Start Early

Parents should not assume that they need to wait until their children reach a certain age to begin their spiritual training. Samuel’s mother Hannah had at most three to six years with Samuel before he was sent off to the temple,²¹⁸ and yet that proved to be enough to set him on the path of faithful service and devotion to the Lord that he followed throughout his life.²¹⁹ Paul also indicates that the spiritual training Timothy received from his mother and grandmother impacted him even from infancy.²²⁰ Appendix A gives a list of age-specific ideas for parents to follow with their children, from infancy through high school.²²¹

Types of Material to Read

²¹⁷ Zephaniah 1:12-13

²¹⁸ Lange, “Families of the Bible,” 41-42.

²¹⁹ 1 Samuel chapter 2 indicates that the spiritual environment young Samuel landed in would have been more of a hindrance than a help to his spiritual development, thus increasing the significance of Hannah’s spiritual training at home.

²²⁰ 2 Timothy 3:15: “And how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

²²¹ Appendix A is largely based on Gurgel, *Sharing the Promise*, 27-28, with some modifications and additions.

When selecting material to use for family devotions, parents must remember the truth that August Pieper established above, that “every individual part of the spiritual life of the Church must derive from the Word.”²²² The Word of God, therefore, must be the focal point of the family devotion in order for the power of the Holy Spirit to be at work, because the Holy Spirit has chosen to work only through the Word. Kenneth Gangel fails to recognize this truth when he says, “Sometimes family worship may include only singing, discussing a troubling situation, reading some good Christian fiction (like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C.S. Lewis), or just taking a walk to enjoy a sunset.”²²³ The two main options the family must decide between, then, are the Bible itself and devotional material that is based on the Bible.

If the family decides to use the Bible itself, they might do well to start with fundamental and easy-to-understand books, such as Genesis or the gospel of Mark. If parents would like additional assistance to help them become better prepared to read and understand the Bible as a whole, they might consider purchasing the book *Bible Basics* by Donald W. Patterson (available from Northwestern Publishing House). The book is short (96 pages), provides basic information on how the Bible is organized, and offers guidance on how to understand the Bible. It also gives a broad overview of the Bible’s content, which helps readers fit people and events into the broader framework of Scripture.

A family may also choose to use published devotional materials. Although they are not the exact words of God in the same sense as the Bible is, well-written devotionals do still reflect the essence of God’s Word, and as such are just as suitable for home devotions. D.A. Harsha writes, “The world abounds with works that reflect the truths of the Bible in sunbeams, and that bring these truths in direct contact with the conscience and the heart.”²²⁴

When properly selected, devotionals have significant benefits. First, devotionals can serve as an intermediate step for the family that is not yet confident in understanding or interpreting Scripture. Steven Staude remarks, “For the layman who is not used to holding Bible study in his home, the use of other materials can help initiate the devotions until he has built up

²²² Pieper, “The True Reconstruction of the Church,” 87.

²²³ Kenneth Gangel and Elizabeth Gangel, *Building a Christian Family* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 133.

²²⁴ D.A. Harsha, *Devotional Thoughts of Eminent Divines* (New York: American Tract Society, 1866), xii,xiii, quoted in Bivens, “Using Devotional Classics,” 8.

his confidence to 'go it on his own.'"²²⁵ Second, devotionals can aid the family in applying the Bible to their own lives, since readily apparent applications do not always flow easily from every part of the Bible. Louis Sievert explains:

The value of a devotion book is that it can help the person think about situations that apply to him which he might have overseen in his own reading without a devotion. Another benefit of such a devotion book is that it helps the reader select certain passages in an orderly fashion. This gives direction to his reading.²²⁶

In the end, the choice of using either the Bible or devotional material will depend on how confident the father or mother feels in the role of devotion leader.

Criteria for Devotionals

If the family chooses to use published devotional material, they must exercise care in selecting proper devotionals. Paul's words to the Thessalonians are just as important for us to consider: "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil."²²⁷ Not every devotional that is published is fit to be used because not every devotional accurately reflects the central message of God's Word. Specifically, parents need to be on their guard against devotionals that do nothing more than moralize. Devotionals whose primary focus is on what we should do for God instead of on what God has done for us must be avoided. Such devotionals cause our assurance of salvation to rest upon our subjective feelings or our good works, instead of on the historical facts of what Christ did to save us. Using these kinds of devotionals could actually weaken faith instead of strengthen it! Rather, devotionals should focus on the law to expose our sin and then focus on Christ who forgives our sin, making salvation completely dependent upon Christ. Encouragements toward sanctified living should flow out of an appreciation for what Christ did for us, not out of a sense of obligation that we must make ourselves acceptable to God. As a general rule, parents should look for devotional material published by either Northwestern Publishing House or Concordia Publishing House, as these publishing houses make a conscious effort to follow the criteria outlined above. Appendix B

²²⁵ Steven O. Staude, "Building Home Bible Study" (WLS Essay File, 1982): 9.

²²⁶ Louis J. Sievert, "Worship in the Home – Family Devotions" (WLS Essay File, 1978): 7.

²²⁷ 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22

includes recommendations and reviews of various devotionals from these publishing houses to assist the family in choosing a devotional that is right for them.

Importance of Questions in the Devotion Time

A final point to consider when choosing a devotional is whether or not it includes questions for discussion. While these are not absolutely necessary, they do greatly enhance what family members gain from the devotion time. Even the family that chooses to read from the Bible should consider ways to discuss the material that was read.²²⁸ Gangel comments:

Family worship should be fitted to the children's interests and needs. High level discussions of theological issues are good for husbands and wives but can be deadly at family devotions. The more children and teens talk during family worship, the more parents can understand their problems and show ways that God's Word addresses those problems. When the rest of the family sits and listens to Dad preach, practicality drops to a low ebb.²²⁹

Studies also indicate that a family devotion which includes discussion has a greater impact upon participants than a family devotion in which only the leader speaks. Lee reports that "patterns of worship associated with the most consistently positive youth outcomes involved youth directly in reading, praying, and talking about some topic or the place of God in their lives."²³⁰ Such participation is naturally encouraged by the use of open-ended questions. Social Cognitive Learning Theory developed by Bandura also supports the use of questions to stimulate discussion:

Bandura suggests that actual or symbolically modeled behavior is more likely to be learned when it is repeated, when modeled by multiple sources (e.g., both parents), when attention is high, and when the target of the modeling (in this case, the youth) engages in reproductions of the modeled behavior. Thus, if both parents are involved in frequent family worship, if a youth is actively involved in the worship process, themselves reading devotional material, praying, and talking about their own faith, then we might expect that their attention would be more engaged and that they would reproduce at least some behavior modeled by their parents. This would lead them to endorse active faith attitudes

²²⁸ The *NIV Today's Light Bible* published by Concordia Publishing House is an excellent resource in this regard. The entire Bible is broken up into manageable daily portions of about three chapters, with the option of shortening that reading to about one chapter if necessary. Each section begins with a paragraph that helps the reader "get the big picture" of the section under consideration and ends with a brief devotion to help readers understand and apply that section of Scripture to their daily lives. Discussion could spring from this devotion.

²²⁹ Gangel, *Building a Christian Family*, 131.

²³⁰ Lee et. al. "Family Worship Patterns," 380.

and behaviors. Numerous others have suggested that active involvement in an activity (in this case reading, discussion, and prayer) will increase interest, motivation, and learning.²³¹

If the family chooses to use material that does not include questions, the devotion leaders might choose to create their own by previewing the material and formulating appropriate questions. Luther's four elements of meditation could provide a simple template for doing this. The four elements are confession (i.e., "What sin does this lead me to confess?"), thanksgiving (i.e., "For what does this lead me to give thanks to God [generally focused on the forgiveness of sins in Christ and on the blessings that result]?"), instruction (i.e., "How does this instruct me to think?" or "What does this instruct me to do in my life?"), and petition (i.e., "What does this lead me to pray?"). Other suggestions to encourage participation could be to close the devotion by singing a hymn or by asking each of those present to say a prayer.

Preparing for Devotion Time

Beginning a devotional routine is similar to beginning an exercise routine. One cannot simply begin without preparation. The person who sets out to begin an exercise routine will need to consider a schedule for the specific times they plan to work out and for the duration of those workouts, the specific exercises they plan to do, the place they will exercise, and any necessary clothing or equipment. Likewise, the family that sets out to begin a devotional routine will need to make certain preparations as well.

First, the family should set a specific time of day at which the devotion will take place. Natural times may be after supper or in the morning, but the family should pick the time at which most of its members can be present. Once the time has been set, the family must make every effort to stick to it. Richard Lauersdorf comments, "Plan a definite time in that daily schedule and let nothing short of an earthquake disrupt the schedule."²³² Second, the family should set achievable goals for the length and frequency of the devotion. For one family, it may be achievable to conduct home devotions every evening for a half-hour. For another family, it may only be achievable to conduct home devotions once or twice a week for five to ten minutes. The

²³¹ Ibid., 373.

²³² Richard Lauersdorf, "Spiritual Renewal Begins at Home" (WLS Essay File, 1988): 17.

important thing, however, is that the family set achievable goals that can be met. If the family finds that circumstances make it impossible to stick to the schedule on a particular day, they might consider drastically shortening the devotional time by reading a short psalm, singing one verse of a hymn, or having one person recite a favorite Bible passage. This accommodates the realities of life while still preserving the routine. Third, the family should seek to eliminate as many distractions as possible during the devotional time by turning off the television, cell phones, and other devices that may cause disruptions.

As with an exercise routine, it may be necessary for the family to force themselves to stick to the schedule at first. The love and desire to read and hear about God is a fruit of sanctification, which means that it grows the more the family comes into contact with the Word. Therefore, family should not be discouraged if they do not enjoy the devotional time right from the start. God alone can and will work that desire in people's hearts, gradually increasing a love for his Word through that Word. Lauersdorf writes,

There are various stages to Bible study. Perhaps we could call stage one, the lowest stage, the "medicine stage." You do it because it's supposed to be good for you. And then you take it only as long as you think you need it and when there seems to be no other solution. Stage two is the "bran cereal" stage. You eat it regularly and it's good for you, but even with raisins added, it's still dry. The third stage is the "hot fudge sundae" stage, really enjoyable and a treat to which you look forward.²³³

Perhaps in the beginning stages, the family might consider teaming up with another family in the congregation that is seeking to establish a devotional routine as well. These families could regularly pray for and encourage each other to remain faithful in their shared endeavor.

These suggestions will help the family to begin and maintain a regular devotional routine. Even the family who follows these suggestions to the best of their ability, however, will go through periods of lapses and low motivation. These things will happen because we all remain sinners who do not value the Word of God as we ought. When these times occur, though, families should not simply give up. Ronald Schlegel writes:

We will never find the perfect solution to our tendency to let worship slide. We will never find material that will always lead us into joyful willing worship. We will never find a time that will always be right for each person in the home. We will never be able to make family worship so vital that it will displace all other activities and priorities. But we do not stop trying. We continue because we are God's forgiven people, because we share the message of forgiveness and salvation, because we are given the power by the Holy Spirit to grow in our relationship to God and to one another by the Word. We never stop

²³³ Ibid., 9.

dedicating ourselves to the privilege of worship and, forgiven and renewed, rededicating the time to worship when we fail.²³⁴

Structuring the Devotional Time

Since God's Word is the only vital component of a family devotion, any devotional structure that highlights God's Word is sufficient. What is offered below is simply a suggestion for the family who would appreciate further direction in structuring their devotional time.

The model that follows was suggested by Gurgel²³⁵ with the exception of the first point. As indicated earlier, beginning the devotion time by asking each member of the family to share the high points and low points of their days gives family members a chance to connect with each other and share each other's joys and burdens. If children become accustomed to this pattern when they are young, they may be less likely to close off to their parents as adolescents, when they especially need the support and guidance of their family. This pattern also establishes the habit of addressing the cares and concerns of our lives with God's Word. One may even be pleasantly surprised to find how often the theme for that day's devotion speaks directly to an issue that a family member had raised.

1. Ask each family member to share high points and low points from their day.
2. Scripture Reading (from the Bible, or from a devotional book)
3. Involving the family in discussion of what was read. If there is a life application question, go around the table and give each person the opportunity to answer.
4. Prayer
5. Music (Hymn)

From Formal to Informal

As families become more accustomed to bringing God's Word into their family in a formal way, they begin to discover and take advantage of ways to bring God's Word into their family in an informal way as well. The impact of these "teachable moments" was discussed

²³⁴ Ronald Schlegel, *Family Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), quoted in Gurgel, *Sharing the Promise*, 28-29.

²³⁵ Gurgel, *Sharing the Promise*, 25-26.

above. What follows are suggestions given by Gurgel as to areas where parents can look for this “informal” instruction to take place.²³⁶

1. Listen carefully to your children’s questions because they can be special moments of opportunity.
2. Informal opportunities happen most often when we are spending a good deal of time with our children. Also, be aware that “quality” time has a way of showing up only in the midst of a larger “quantity” of time. When asked how they spell love, children respond t-i-m-e!
3. Days of “success” and “outward blessings” in the lives of our children and our family give us special opportunity to point them to our Lord as the source of every blessing.
4. Days of “difficulty” and “hardship” give us some of the most important informal opportunities to show our children by word and prayer that we trust “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).
5. Don’t be afraid to admit to your children where you have been wrong (especially if that wrong was against them). Such confession of sin is not “weakness” on our part as Christian parents, rather such confession is letting our children know that we too live only by daily repentance and forgiveness. We too are “sinner/saints” as they are.
6. Make the most of your partnership with the church/school:
 - a. Talk about the worship service on the way home from church. You might discuss these things: main thought in the sermon and the applications to our lives, what the hymns and psalms mean to us, the content of the prayers (including special prayers), if a communion service, the special meaning of the Lord’s Supper.
 - b. Ask your children about the Sunday school lesson or youth Bible study discussion. You might ask these questions: Who were the main people in the lesson? What happened? What did the Lord do? How do the Bible truths apply to our lives?
 - c. If your children attend a Lutheran Elementary School, ask about the Bible history story or religion lesson taught in school that day. You could use the same questions as in b) above.

²³⁶ Ibid., 30-31.

- d. By doing so you are reminding your children that the Word is important beyond the walls of the classroom and after we step out of the church doors.

Pastor's Role

In WELS circles, it appears that low Bible class attendance is bemoaned much more than the lack of devotional activity that takes place among families. Perhaps this is because pastors can see negligence in Bible study much more clearly than they can see negligence of home devotions. Whatever the reason, however, Schmiede urges us to shift our concern:

One of the easiest ruts for us pastors to get into is to judge the total spirituality of our people by their attendance in the Bible class...However, from the standpoint of the admonitions of Scripture our main concentration ought to be to get the people into the Bible on a daily basis. Sometimes people have hangups about sitting in a "class." That does not necessarily mean they do not love the Word of God. Family altars, daily meditation, daily study and prayer are the first step in encouraging a daily walk with God. You may find that once a person has been led to discover the Scriptures on his own he may be more eager to attend Bible Class.²³⁷

Whether or not personal Bible study or home devotions result in greater attendance for Bible class, however, pastors must make a concerted effort to teach their members how to be in the Word throughout their lives. Gurgel writes:

From the time we prepare God's people for marriage, through all the years of raising their children, and on into the golden years of life, we need to not just urge them to be in the Word, we need to teach them and model for them how to do personal devotions, how to read the Word together as a couple, and how to gather the family around the Word.²³⁸

The first step a pastor must take to achieve this goal is to take to heart this proverb Jesus quoted: "Physician, heal yourself!"²³⁹ The pastor cannot expect his people to be faithful with the Word in their homes and lives if he is not faithful with the Word in his own home and life. As members look to their pastor, they must see him practicing the same things he asks them to practice if they are to take his encouragements seriously. Even if this requires a pastor to make a significant change in his own life, he can do so confidently and unashamedly, knowing that because God's mercy and forgiveness are new every morning, it is never too late to start.

²³⁷ Schmiede, "A Biblical Look at Bible Study," 11.

²³⁸ Gurgel, "Meeting the Needs of the 21st Century Family," 14.

²³⁹ Luke 4:23

After establishing this as his own practice, the pastor may do several things to implement the practice of home devotions in the lives of his members. First, he can give encouragements from the pulpit where applicable. This encouragement, however, must also be followed up by further explanation and demonstration in order to teach the members how to conduct home devotions. Such demonstrations may be given in the homes of individual families as the pastor does his every-member visits. The pastor may also make use of existing education agencies, such as pre-marriage counseling sessions or Bible classes, to give a “live” demonstration of how to conduct a devotion with the family. Homework for catechism class or for religion class in the Christian day school can involve discussing religious truths with parents or even reading an excerpt from a devotional together. Materials that families can use for home devotions might also be displayed in the church and made available for use.

Conclusion

As an athletic team is only as strong as its players, so a local congregation is only as strong as its members. We began this paper by encouraging the pastor to make explicit efforts to strengthen his people to build up the body of Christ by teaching those people to put God’s Word to use in their families. We considered the motivation, obstacles, and practical suggestions the pastor might discuss with his people to encourage them to begin family devotions. We ended by noting a few specific things the pastor can do to make family devotions a reality in the lives of his members. None of this was done, however, with the intent of downplaying or diminishing the faithful work a pastor does week after week as he brings the Word to bear on his members in sermons and Bible classes. These things too are explicit duties the Lord has given to pastors,²⁴⁰ who dare not use their emphasis on family devotions to excuse neglect or carelessness in teaching and preaching. It may be that many of the pastor’s members are simply too spiritually immature to serve as strong spiritual leaders in their families. Yet even this must never cause a pastor to lose sight of that which Paul declares as a specific duty of the pastoral office: “to equip

²⁴⁰ 2 Timothy 4:1,2 (The apostle Paul speaking to young pastor Timothy): “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: *Preach the Word*; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and *careful instruction*.”

the saints for ministry-work, with the goal that Christ's body be built up."²⁴¹ As the pastor sees the spiritual maturity of his members grow, he must encourage them to make intentional efforts to build up those around them with the Word, especially the members of their own families. There is no telling what blessings God may unleash upon the world through a congregation whose members are constantly feeding their souls with God's Word, both at church and at home!

Introducing a Lectionary-Based Devotional Series

In making suggestions for materials and patterns of home devotions, Schulz writes:

Another pattern is the reading of a well-chosen selection from Scripture without a ready-made commentary. Comment and discussion may follow. Where discussion occurs, the family worship becomes a wholesome combination of instruction and worship, interpretation and applications. The devotion closes with a prepared prayer or one composed on the basis of the reading.²⁴²

This is the general pattern I will seek to follow as I create my own devotional series. This series will be based off of the lectionary, with the goal of providing a connection between what the family hears in church on Sunday and what they meditate on throughout the week. My hope is that this format will provide more time and opportunity for the Sunday message to make an impact in people's minds and hearts. On Monday, the gospel lesson from the previous Sunday will serve as the basis for the devotion, and then for the rest of the week the other lessons will be used: The CW Epistle and Old Testament Lesson, the CWS Epistle and Old Testament Lesson, and the Psalm. The order in which these lessons will be presented may vary depending on the flow or sequence that seems to work best.

There are few good devotionals available today which include questions for discussion. In light of the importance of discussing spiritual matters (as addressed in the section on Parental Influence), it would be good if more devotionals included such questions. To address this need, the lectionary-based devotions in Appendix C include discussion questions after each Scripture lesson. The full format of the devotions is as follows: A short introduction that establishes the theme and hints at the specific thrust of the lesson for that day, the lesson itself, two or three questions that will seek to draw out the specific truths from that text and apply it to the life of the

²⁴¹ Author's translation of the Greek for Ephesians 4:12: πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἀγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας, εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

²⁴² Schulz, "The Proper Use of Scripture," 3.

family members, a one-paragraph mediation, and a closing prayer. For this project, I have produced one week of these lectionary devotionals to serve as a template for what might eventually be produced for all three years of the lectionary.

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Appendix A – Age Specific Ideas for Spiritual Training²⁴³

1. Ideas for the first two years
 - a. Show them pictures of Jesus (be sure to use pictures of Jesus that are always similar!).
 - b. Begin teaching them simple songs of faith (don't let Sesame Street tunes be all that they are humming!).
 - c. Purchase some Scripturally sound CD's or cassettes to play around the house or when traveling in the car.
 - d. Strong Roots for Tender Shoots (Cradle Roll) curriculum, available from Northwestern Publishing House, contains Christian parenting materials for pre-birth through age 4, including age-appropriate books, pamphlets with tips, songs, poems, and activities.
 - e. Speak simple bedtime prayers for them until they begin to speak them with you.
 - f. Find the simplest and most colorful Bible story books.
 - g. Whatever you do: repeat, repeat, repeat.
2. Preschoolers
 - a. Purchase more advanced Bible story books with plenty of pictures and not too many words to the page.
 - b. Continue teaching simple songs of faith and adding new ones.
 - c. Find some CD's or cassettes that appeal to this age.
 - d. Begin helping them learn to pray from the heart as they speak their own prayers.
3. Elementary School
 - a. Begin using more advanced Bible story books and other devotional tools.
 - b. Continue helping them to learn to speak their own prayers.
 - c. From time to time have them tell their favorite Bible story and explain why that one is their favorite.

²⁴³ This list is largely based on Gurgel, *Sharing the Promise*, 27-28, with some modifications and additions.

- d. If you haven't done so before this, purchase a subscription to **Parents Crosslink**, available from Northwestern Publishing House. This will give you both Christian parenting encouragement and daily devotions to use in your home.
 - e. Review your child's Bible stories that they bring home from school or Sunday School.
4. Junior and senior high school teens
- a. "Teens need time to talk about issues. They are searching for solutions to a growing list of life's challenges. Christian homes provide plenty of opportunities to help them search in the light of God's Word." (*From the Ground Up – Kremer*)
 - b. Recognize the generation gap by asking teens how this applies to their problems, by letting teens write down their issues and then seeing if the Bible addresses them as they go through it.
 - c. Perhaps now is a good time to begin reading selected portions of the Bible. Be sure to plan your readings and questions for discussion.
 - i. If you would like to study the Bible in-depth, consult *The People's Bible* commentary series and the pre-prepared questions in study guides that are available. Schulz adds that "*The People's Bible* seems like a natural transition to lead the family from over-reliance on the printed devotional book to a more intense use of Scripture for family worship."²⁴⁴
 - ii. If you are not able/comfortable planning out discussion questions on your own and would like to take a more laid-back approach, use a devotional that includes questions for discussion at the end.
 - iii. The *NIV Today's Light Bible* would be a happy medium between these first two suggestions. This is for the family that wants to read through the Bible itself. The entire Bible is broken up into manageable daily portions of about 3 chapters, with the option of shortening that reading to about one chapter if necessary. Each section begins with a paragraph that helps the reader "get the big picture" of the section under consideration and ends with a brief devotion to help readers understand and apply that section of

²⁴⁴ Schulz, "The Proper Use of Scripture," 4.

Scripture to their daily lives. This would be a valuable resource for the family that would like to dig into the Scriptures.

- d. From time to time you could ask the teen to plan the devotion for an evening. Have him/her select a portion of Scripture to read and prepare discussion questions and a prayer.
- e. If you are working with teenagers and younger children, you could have the teens read the Bible stories to their younger siblings.
- f. Discuss the news and bring God's Word to bear.

Appendix B – Literature Review and Devotional Resource Recommendations

The family who wishes to make use of devotional material has many good options to choose from. On the one hand, this is a good thing because there is no shortage of suitable resources. On the other hand, this can be a bad thing because the family may not know how to determine which devotionals best suit their unique situation. Finding the best devotional can be a frustrating experience if one feels as if there is no better method than to close their eyes and take the first book they pull off of the devotional shelf. The list that follows aims to assist families in choosing devotionals that best suit their needs. For purposes of this review, I have grouped devotionals into nine categories.

The first category is

Bible Story-Based

Devotionals. These resources are aimed mostly at families with young children, as learning concrete Bible stories is the best way for young children to learn about Jesus. When choosing devotionals from this category, parents may want to consider finding a book that includes

Devotional Categories

1. **Bible Story-Based Devotionals**
2. **Scripture-Based Devotionals**
3. **Life Application-Based Devotionals**
4. **Devotionals Including Questions for Discussion**
5. **Electronic Devotionals**
6. **Lent/Advent Devotionals**
7. **Devotionals for Times of Grief**
8. **Teen-Specific Devotionals**
9. **Devotionals for the Elderly**

comprehension or application questions at the end, as these are especially helpful for children. The best resource I found in this category is *The Story Bible* published by Concordia Publishing House. Bible Story-Based Devotionals, however, are not only for younger children. *Egermeier's Bible Story Book*, for example, contains 312 longer stories designed for middle-school aged children. For anyone who has not had the benefit of a solid biblical education, learning Bible stories is a vital foundation for increasing spiritual knowledge and maturity.

The second category is Scripture-Based Devotionals. This does not mean to imply that devotionals in the other categories are not scriptural. It simply means that the devotions offered in these books are based off of a specific passage or portion of Scripture. Most published

devotionals fall into this general category. These devotions are generally short and end with a prayer, offering a simple format that is easy to follow. One interesting resource in this category that is different from the others is the *NIV Today's Light Bible*, published by Concordia Publishing House. This is, in effect, a devotional on the entire Bible which gives introductory remarks and concluding applications for every section of the Bible. This would be a great resource for the family who would like to read the Bible itself, but would also like some help along the way.

The third category is Life Application-Based Devotionals. These differ from the Scripture-Based Devotionals because they are much more focused on providing illustrations from daily life that teach how Christians ought to think, live, and behave. Though eminently practical, as a rule these devotionals tend to moralize (i.e., direct people to follow God's will without a clear focus on repenting of their sin and looking to Jesus as Savior). For that reason, they should serve only as a supplement to devotionals from other categories. One exception to this rule would be *365 Family Devotions (Little Visits)* published by Concordia Publishing House, which generally does a good job of staying gospel-focused even while the devotion centers around an experience from daily life. The final entry, *Parents Crosslink*, is not so much a devotional as a quarterly that gives tips to Christian parents for raising their children.

The fourth category is Devotionals Including Questions for Discussion. The devotionals included in this category only differ from those in the previous categories in that questions are provided at the end of the devotion to promote discussion. For this reason the devotionals in this category are repeat from previous categories. These devotionals are included in a separate category because of the value of discussing spiritual truths, which was highlighted in the section on Parental Influence. There are few good devotionals, however, which include questions for discussion. To begin addressing this need, the lectionary-based devotions in Appendix C include questions for discussion after each Scripture lesson.

The fifth category is Electronic Devotionals. Since we live in a digital age, many may prefer to view devotions electronically. While there are not a great number of good electronic devotionals available, the WELS daily devotion (which can be e-mailed) and the Time of Grace sermons by Pastor Mark Jeske serve as two excellent no-cost options.

The sixth category is Lent/Advent Devotionals. The books in this category offer devotions for each day of the respective season of the church year. Because the seasons of Lent

and Advent encourage increased spiritual focus and preparation, these seasons offer a natural opportunity for families to begin a devotional routine. Northwestern Publishing House offers many excellent devotionals in this category.

The seventh category is Devotionals for Times of Grief. Richard Lauersdorf has written three excellent devotionals in this area, two which address coping with death and one which addresses coping with sorrows in general. One of the Lord's greatest blessings is the way he draws us to himself and increases our faith in him through suffering. Because difficult times in our lives often drive us to seek comfort in God's Word, these times provide a natural opportunity to begin a devotional routine.

The eighth category is Teen-Specific Devotionals. As noted in the section on adolescence, children in this age group face many different and unique life challenges which can be difficult to deal with. The devotionals in this category are written specifically to apply God's Word to issues teens face. These books also include questions that can be used as a springboard for families to discuss issues raised in the devotion.

The ninth category is Devotionals for the Elderly. The aging process is difficult for anyone to endure, and yet many of the Lord's most beautiful promises apply most directly to those who are nearing their departure from this life. Henry Paustian and Richard Lauersdorf do a wonderful service to the elderly by reminding them of these promises in their two excellent devotionals.

Because the market of devotional material seems to be flooded constantly with new titles, it is nearly impossible to do a comprehensive review of every devotional published. This review, therefore, is limited mainly to devotionals published by Northwestern Publishing House and Concordia Publishing House, since the synods they represent have a clear understanding of the distinction between law and gospel and strive to avoid the danger of moralizing. This does not mean to exclude the reality, however, that such parameters may leave out other good devotionals produced by other publishing houses. Even within these parameters, there are likely other devotionals which have been overlooked from which a family may derive great benefit. The following list is offered, therefore, merely as a starting point for those who are searching for suitable devotional material.

Bible Story-Based Devotionals

Engelbrecht, Edward A. and Gail E. Pawlitz, eds. *The Story Bible*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011.

This is the best Bible story book I found for children ages 2-8. The 130 Bible stories are written simply and accurately, each focused on proclaiming Jesus as Savior. Difficult words are listed before each story and defined in an appendix for easy reference. The pictures are beautiful and vibrant – real-to-life without being cartoonish. The layout is appealing. The introduction includes instructions as to how parents can use this book with different ages. Each story includes an “Ask-Do-Pray” section. “Ask” includes a few questions to check comprehension and emphasize God’s love. “Do” includes an activity that will drive the story home. “Pray” includes a short prayer to close the story.

Taylor, Kenneth N. *Family Time Bible in Pictures*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1995.

Second to *The Story Bible*, this is also a good Bible story book for families to read together with younger children ages 3 and up. 128 Bible stories are included with pictures. Questions are also included at the end of each Bible story, however, they are not as Christ-centered and gospel-centered as those in *The Story Bible*.

Taylor, Kenneth N. *The Picture Bible for Little People*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004.

This book is intended for the youngest of children, ages 1-6. The stories are short and simple, and there is one comprehension question at the end of each of the 125 stories. Children can search for a surprise dove hiding in each picture.

Egermeier, Elsie E. *Egermeier’s Bible Story Book*. Anderson, IN: Warner Press, 2008.

Another good Bible story book for an older level, perhaps grades 4-8. The 312 stories are longer and written at a higher level. Pictures are included every couple pages. There are no discussion questions.

One Hundred Bible Stories. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998.

These Bible stories have one picture per story and feature 3 discussion questions at the end of each story for family use. The suggested grade range for this book is 3-6.

Scripture-Based Devotionals

NIV Today’s Light Bible. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999.

This is for the family that wants to read through the Bible itself. The entire Bible is broken up into manageable daily portions of about 3 chapters, with the option of shortening that reading to about one chapter if necessary. Each section begins with a paragraph that helps the reader “get the big picture” of the section under consideration and ends with a brief devotion to help readers understand and apply that section of Scripture to their daily lives. This would be a valuable resource for the family that would like to dig into the Scriptures.

Braun, John A. *Come, Take a Seat: A Start for Your Own Personal or Family Devotions*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997.

This is a great resource for the family that is seeking to begin to make devotions a part of their daily routine. It offers suggestions on how to get started, gives 30 days of 5-minute devotions to start, and then offers suggestions on how to continue the pattern they’ve started.

Kratz, Kenneth R. *The Word Speaks*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011.

This is a solid devotional that focuses on the words of Jesus. The author touches human questions, needs, and sins with the words of Jesus in a way that is engaging, edifying, inspirational, and gospel-centered. I would highly recommend this devotional for either individual or family use. There are 365 devotions – one for each day of the year. It is useful for Christian “rookies” or “veterans” alike.

Lauersdorf, Richard E. *Beside Quiet Waters*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005.

As the title indicates, this devotional is focused on applying the Lord’s comforting promises to lives that are flooded with problems arising from sin. This is no empty positive-thinking inspirational, but the peace and comfort it offers is based on the rock-solid truths from God’s Word. This is also a solid choice for families or individuals.

Carter, Stephen J. *My Daily Devotion: God’s Promises for Joyful Living*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988.

This devotional is a little dated, but the applications are still appropriate and relevant. Each devotion begins with a section of Scripture to read, with the devotion being based on one verse from that section that is printed at the top. These devotions are solidly based in God’s Word, leading the readers into Scripture and comforting them with God’s promises.

Norden, Rudolph F. *Each Day With Jesus*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994.

This is another solid devotional. It tends to be a little more theological than practical (i.e., making specific applications to everyday life), but is not impractical.

Carter, Stephen J. *Witness to the Light*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006.

The purpose of this book is as the title indicates – to encourage Christians to witness their faith by telling others the message that Jesus is their Savior from sin. As such, this devotional focuses more on what we should do as Christians than on what Christ has done for us. This is not necessarily a bad thing for a devotional to do, but I would recommend this only to be used alongside another devotional that keeps what Christ has done for us at the center.

Lauersdorf, Richard E. *Together with Jesus*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003.

This is a book of 366 short, but excellently written, daily devotions for a year. The devotions are written in an easy-to-understand way that applies well to our daily lives, and yet they still are firmly and solidly grounded in God’s Word with Christ at the center. This is a great all-around choice, especially for someone who is new to doing devotions with their family.

Senkbeil, Harold L. *Where in the World Is God?* Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999.

This is a gem. The 70 devotions contained in this book are a distillation of some of the sermons of Harold Senkbeil, and they are well-written and apply excellently to heart and life. Law and gospel are explicit. Though based off of sermons, the devotions are not overly long – only a page and a half in a small book. I highly recommend this work.

Gullerud, C.M. *Family Devotional Hour*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991.

Though slightly dated, these 100 devotions are *excellent* for family use in the 21st century. They begin with an opening prayer or hymn, include the text of the Scripture that serves as the basis for the devotion, and then proceed to explain and apply the text in a clear, edifying, and meaningful way. This is a great all-around choice.

Best-Loved Passages of the Bible. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998.

This devotional offers 300 short devotions that are based on favorite verses from all parts of Scripture. These devotions focus on offering biblical encouragement and comfort, are generally well-written, and apply well to daily life. Each devotion ends with a short prayer or hymn verse. This is a solid devotional.

Jeske, Mark. *Time of Grace: Daily Devotional Companion*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010.

These are excellent 1-minute devotional “sound-bites” that begin with something from our everyday experience and then apply God’s Word to it. Though short, these devotions are very applicable and Biblically solid. This could be useful for a family breakfast-time devotion before everyone runs out the door to start their day.

Lauersdorf, Richard E. *With Our Eyes on Jesus: Devotions on the Minor Festivals of the Church Year*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000.

This book offers 35 devotions on the minor festivals of the church, focusing on the saints and other festivals. However, though based off of the lives of the saints, these devotions remain Christ-centered, fixing our eyes on Jesus the Savior. These devotions relate our lives to the lives of the saints and then focus everything on Christ, with edifying impact. This is a unique devotional that could be used by a family looking for a change of pace in their devotional routines.

Rottmann, Erik, ed. *Guide Me, Savior: 365 Timeless Devotions from Portals of Prayer*. St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2006.

This devotional series tends to talk about the verse or verses and draw generic and theological conclusions that are not as readily apprehended as “good applications.” It is not as well written as some of the others I have surveyed, however, it is still of good spiritual value and is Christ-centered. One positive element that this devotional has is that it gets the reader into the Bible a little more by suggesting a longer section of Scripture be read before going into the devotion, which is based on one verse out of the longer section.

Rottmann, Erik, ed. *Guide Me, Lord: 365 Timeless Devotions from Portals of Prayer*. St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2007.

The comments from *Guide Me, Savior* would apply to this resource as well.

Rottmann, Erik, ed. *Guide Me Ever: 365 Classic Devotions from Portals of Prayer*. St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2005.

The comments from *Guide Me, Savior* would apply to this resource as well.

Jahn, Curtis A., ed. *Meditations on Favorite Scriptures*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2007.

This devotional contains 366 devotions from past volumes of *Meditations*. The devotions are solid and Christ-centered, but tend toward being more theological than practical. This isn't to say that they are *not* practical, but the applications to our lives aren't always as explicit or user-friendly as in some of the other devotionals.

For Such a Time as This. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2010.

This work contains 300 devotions, 100 each on the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles. These were selected from past volumes of *Meditations*. Its goal is to offer comfort from

God's Word when life is difficult, which it does beautifully. These devotions are well-written and apply well to our lives. Since this work is so focused on giving comfort, a steady diet of this devotional *might* become slightly redundant. God's Word has other things to offer us besides comfort for hurting times, so I might suggest the occasional interspersing of another well-rounded devotional.

Luther, Martin. *Reading the Psalms with Luther*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007.

This devotional is based on the Psalms and contains devotional introductions to each psalm written by Martin Luther. It is solid and beneficial to read, but probably should be reserved for those who have already gone through catechism class and are familiar with its terminology. The wording is sometimes a bit complicated too. But if nothing else, this devotional gets the reader into the Psalms, a gem of God's Word.

Luther, Martin. *Through Faith Alone*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999.

This devotional contains short excerpts of Luther's commentaries, sermons, and other devotional writings that the editor has paired with Bible verses. While this devotional does offer some good applications to everyday life and is obviously Christ-centered, it does contain theological and ecclesiastical language and references to history that may be difficult to understand if one is unfamiliar with such language and Reformation history. I wouldn't recommend this for those who are beginning devotions, but it would be a good starting point for those who would want to be introduced to Luther's writings in a devotional setting.

Luther, Martin. *Family Devotions for Every Day in the Church Year*. Dearborn, MI: Mark V Publications, 1996.

This devotional follows the seasons of the church year by utilizing selections of Luther's writings, such as his commentaries on Genesis, John and the Prophets, along with excerpts from his various Postilles and some of his polemical writings. These devotions are solidly Scripture-based and Christ-centered, but do use theological words and concepts and historical references that might make it difficult for those who are not used to them or who don't know anything about Luther. For that reason, I wouldn't recommend this for those who are new to family devotions. However, for the family that has been instructed in the Lutheran church and would like to incorporate Luther's writings into their devotional routine, this is an excellent and edifying devotional that does offer practical applications even for today.

Meditations on the Gospels: According to His Word. St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2009.

This devotional would be beneficial for the more dedicated family that wants to read through the gospels. Each devotion begins with an introduction, then prints the Bible verses to be read, then ends with a wrap-up devotional commentary on the verses and a prayer. These devotions are a little longer than some others simply because of the Bible verses it includes. It also tends more toward imparting knowledge and theological truths than practical applications, but does not fail to offer practical comfort and guidance from God's Word in a meaningful way. This would be a good choice for the family that is dedicated to spending a little more time digging into the Scriptures and would also like to increase their knowledge along the way.

Kinnaman, Scot A, ed. *Treasury of Daily Prayer*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008.

This resource follows the church year and offers families actual orders of worship that can be used in the home, such as Matins, Vespers, Compline, etc. For each calendar date of the year, the appropriate prayers, scripture readings, psalms, hymns, portions of the catechism, and writings from Lutheran theologians can be utilized so that family worship follows the flow of the church year. This resource takes a while to get used to, because you have to flip around to different portions in the book to find the appropriate sections for the specific day. I would not recommend this for those who are beginning to get used to home devotions. But if the father of the family is comfortable leading short orders of worship and wants to make the home devotions "feel" more like a worship setting, this would be a valuable resource.

Braun, John A. *Closer to Jesus: Devotions on the Savior's Galilean Ministry*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2002.

This book offers 55 devotions centered on Jesus' Galilean ministry. These devotions focus primarily on giving the background and telling the story of the events in Jesus' ministry. They do not seek primarily to offer applications to heart and life. But for the family that would like to better understand the well-known stories of Jesus' life from a fresh perspective, this book would serve that purpose well.

Life Application-Based Devotionals

365 Family Devotions (Little Visits, Vol.1-4). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002-2005.

These devotions have been written by pastors and educators who have drawn upon their experiences to provide illustrations from daily life and link them to God's Word. The devotion begins with a Bible verse and ends with some questions for discussion and a prayer. These are well-written application-based devotionals, good for families with multiple children (aimed at children from middle school to high school). Because of the heavy emphasis on illustrations and

stories, however, the devotions sometimes lack substance, that is, at times the illustrations (rather than God's Word) dominate the devotion. Some of the devotions may be considered "cheesy" by high-schoolers. But biblical truth does not get lost, and the devotions make it easy to talk as a family about God's Word with the discussion questions, something that many other devotionals lack. This is still a good choice for those looking to begin devotional habits in their homes.

Taylor, Kenneth N. *Big Thoughts for Little People*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1983.

Using the alphabet as a learning tool, this illustrated picture book connects Bible themes and verses that teach kids ages 3-6 Christian values. Each spread represents a letter of the alphabet and a Christian value or moral lesson beginning with the same letter. Kids are encouraged to find the lesson being modeled (or not) in the illustrations. There are questions to help the kids apply the lesson to their lives, along with a fun ladybug for the kids to find on each page. This book *must* be supplemented with another gospel-centered Bible story book (such as *The Story Bible*) because there is no reference in this book to the gospel, that Jesus is our Savior.

Little Visits with Jesus. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006.

This book is geared towards children ages 4-7. However, for children of this age range, I would only recommend this as a supplement to *The Story Bible*, because these devotions are application-based and tend to lack gospel substance. Children's first priority should be becoming familiar with the Bible stories themselves.

Parents Crosslink

This eight-page quarterly is aimed at strengthening and encouraging Christian parents for the challenges of raising children in a world that adheres to secular values. Together they address real parenting issues with practical insights and scriptural applications. Available from Northwestern Publishing House.

Devotionals Including Questions for Discussion

365 Family Devotions (Little Visits, Vol.1-4). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002-2005.

These devotions have been written by pastors and educators who have drawn upon their experiences to provide illustrations from daily life and link them to God's Word. The devotion begins with a Bible verse and ends with some questions for discussion and a prayer. These are well-written application-based devotionals, good for families with multiple children (aimed at children from middle school to high school). Because of the heavy emphasis on illustrations and stories, however, the devotions sometimes lack substance, that is, at times the illustrations (rather

than God's Word) dominate the devotion. Some of the devotions may be considered "cheesy" by high-schoolers. But biblical truth does not get lost, and the devotions make it easy to talk as a family about God's Word with the discussion questions, something that many other devotionals lack. This is still a good choice for those looking to begin devotional habits in their homes.

Kremer, Kenneth, ed. *At Home with the Psalms: 100 Family Devotions*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2001.

This devotional presents a selection of more than 60 psalms as the texts for 100 devotions. Each devotion begins with a question for thought, and then concludes with one or two discussion questions and a prayer. These devotions are well-suited for family use.

Electronic Devotionals

WELS Daily Devotion.

This is a good daily devotion that can be accessed at www.wels.net – Today's Devotion. There is also the option of having this devotion e-mailed daily.

Devotions on God's Word.

These downloadable devotions available from Northwestern Publishing House are based off of various portions of the Bible. These would be great for the family who wants to take a closer look at a book or a section of Scripture, but who would like the aid of a devotional in the process. Solid explanation and application. Available at: <http://online.nph.net/s-1472-362-downloadable-devotions.aspx>.

Time of Grace Sermons by Pastor Mark Jeske.

Pastor Jeske is an engaging and edifying preacher whose sermons are Christ-centered and are broadcast worldwide. Viewing these sermons on the Time of Grace website would be a great way to add variety to home devotions. <http://www.timeofgrace.org>.

Lenten/Advent Devotionals

Braun, John A. *Up to Jerusalem: Devotions for Lent and Easter*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997.

These 55 devotions tie together the four gospels and lead you through Jesus' journey to his suffering and final triumph in Jerusalem. These 10-minute devotions paint the scene and tell the story of the Bible text in an interesting way, and then make fitting and meaningful applications for heart and life. This is an excellent family devotional for the Lenten season.

Senkbeil, Harold L. *Triumph at the Cross: Lenten Devotions for Repentance and Renewal*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999.

Do you want to give up something for Lent? Give up 10 minutes of TV a night and read through this devotional for the 40 days of Lent! These are excellent Christ-centered Lenten devotionals for family use that are the product of a distillation of Pastor Senkbeil's sermons – which are engaging and practical. I highly recommend this devotional.

Lauersdorf, Richard E. *Be Near Me, Lord Jesus: Devotions for the Advent and Christmas Seasons*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2002.

As the title indicates, these devotions are for Advent and Christmas, running from December 1 to January 6. These devotions are Christ-centered, engaging, and readable, preparing the readers well to celebrate the Savior's birth.

Luchterhand, Lyle L. *The Lord's Anointed: Advent & Christmas Devotions for Young & Old*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009.

This is another solid series of Advent/Christmas devotions that run from November 27 to January 6. They are well-written and will edify any who read them.

Devotionals for Times of Grief

Lauersdorf, Richard E. *When Jesus Is There: Words of Comfort to Help me Endure my Sorrows*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003.

These 25 well-written devotions are intended for those who have experienced loss for a variety of reasons. These devotions are scripturally solid and offer excellent encouragement and comfort.

Lauersdorf, Richard E. *Help me, Lord: Comfort as I Prepare for my Loved One's Death*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003.

These 25 well-written devotions are excellent for a family that must prepare to say "good-bye" to a loved one. The author brings the comfort of God's Word to the reader in an encouraging and gospel-centered way.

Lauersdorf, Richard E. *With Tears in our Eyes: God's Comfort as I Grieve the Death of my Loved One*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003.

These 25 well-written devotions offer excellent comfort and encouragement from God's Word to the family that must continue life's journey without one of their dearly loved members.

Cook, John Karl. *Love beyond our imagination: Devotions for Christian Families in Recovery from Alcoholism*. Milwaukee: Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service, 1991.

Each devotion consists of family scenarios and conversations centering around the problem of alcoholism. Some are perhaps cheesy. The devotions end with a suggestion for a family activity that seeks to help them overcome the issue. Because these devotions are not based off of any scripture text and are not solid on law and gospel, I do not recommend using this as the only devotional book. However, the situations presented may help the family that struggles with alcoholism begin to confront and discuss some of the issues in a Christian way.

Teen-Specific Devotionals

Ausenhuis, Pam. *Running the Race of Faith*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001.

These devotions are gospel centered and make good application to the everyday lives of teens. They also offer questions at the end for thought and discussion. It is divided into eight weekly chapters with five devotions in each week. This is a good little resource.

Ritter, Eileen. *Life in the Real World* (Vol. 1 and 2). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997 (vol.1) 1999 (vol.2).

These are short 5-minute devotions which are gospel centered and make good application to the everyday lives of teens by injecting the Word into practical situations. The "In My Life" section often offers questions or encouragement that could be used as a springboard for discussion based on the devotion read.

Devotionals for the Elderly

Paustian, Henry E. *Listen! God Is Speaking to You*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005.

This is a wonderful devotional for those who are aging. The author offers gospel comfort and scriptural applications to life situations such as aging, living alone, failing health, feeling helpless, and changing responsibilities and priorities. This would be beneficial for an elderly couple.

Lauersdorf, Richard E. *God's Children Never Die: Words of Comfort as I Face the End of my Life*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003.

These 25 devotions offer excellent encouragement and comfort from God's Word. This would be good for the family to do with one of its members who is approaching death.

Appendix C – Sample Lectionary-Based Devotions
9th Sunday After Pentecost (Year A)
The Christian Lives as Wheat Among Weeds

The following is a sample of what a weekly devotional series based off of the lectionary might look like. Because the gospel lesson sets the theme for the week, it should be used as the first lesson for the week. The following lessons, drawn from both the *Christian Worship* lectionary and the *Christian Worship Supplement* lectionary, can be arranged in whatever order the author deems best. Because the CWS lectionary offers varying numbers of alternate lessons, the number of lessons available for a given week may not always fill out the entire week (Monday through Saturday). For the week below, the CWS lectionary offers one alternate text for the second lesson, leaving 5 total lessons (including the Psalm) which provide devotions through Friday. If, on such weeks, the family would still like to conduct a devotion on Saturday, they could consider other options (such as singing favorite or seasonal hymns, reading another devotion or favorite section of Scripture, highlighting personal insights or “take-aways” from that week’s lessons, etc.). On the other hand, if the family does not have opportunity to make use of all the devotions for a given week, they could simply go in order and do as many as they can. As Friday’s devotion demonstrates, the closing prayer need not always be a pre-written prayer, but could involve the members of the family in saying their own prayers.

Monday

Introduction

Have you ever asked yourself the question, “Why does there have to be so much evil, so many temptations, and so many wicked people in this world?” Some people are tempted to blame God for all the problems in this world. In the gospel lesson for today, however, Jesus places the blame for evil where it belongs – squarely on the devil’s shoulders. Still, the reality remains that until Judgment Day, Christians will have to live in a broken world with wicked people. Jesus addresses this reality in our lesson by comparing Christians to wheat that must grow side-by-side with weeds until the harvest.

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the

wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. ²⁷ “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ²⁸ “ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ²⁹ “ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’ ” ³⁶ Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.” ³⁷ He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. ⁴⁰ “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴² They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Questions for Discussion

- Think about the effect that weeds have on other plants, such as wheat, when they grow close together. What danger does this picture warn us Christians about?

Just as weeds choke wheat, so there are a lot of sinful influences and sinful people we will come into contact with who will tempt us to sin and seek to choke our faith.

- In what specific situations in your life have you often failed to be on your guard against the temptations or influences that come from this sinful world?

Peer pressure from friends to sin, gossip at work, greedy materialism of the world, etc.

- Many times we look more like the weeds of the world than the good wheat Jesus describes. Yet how do we know that on Judgment Day we will be among “the righteous who will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (v.43)?

It is not because we did a perfect job living as wheat among weeds, because we’ve all failed at that. It’s only because Jesus gave us his righteousness, his perfection, to cover over us. He’s forgiven us for all the times when we looked more like weeds than wheat and have allowed ourselves to be influenced by them. That forgiveness is what will make us shine!

- Name one specific area or situation in your life where you would like to improve in living as a Christian amidst sinful people or sinful temptations. What specific change do you hope to make with God’s help?

Answers may vary.

Closing Meditation

“In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus said to his followers. How true it is – Sickness, suffering, sin, persecution, hardships, crying, pain, broken relationships, death – all these things we must endure in our lives. And yet Jesus went on: “But take heart! I have overcome the world!” (John 16:33) Because of Jesus’ victory over sin, death, and over the evil one who inflicted these things on the world in the first place, we can look forward to an eternity in heaven, where every pain and evil will be rooted out and we will shine like the sun in bliss and joy forever. Praise be to our Savior Jesus!

Prayer

Lord, you know how easily we succumb to temptation and sin as we live among the weeds of this world. Yet through your Son Jesus you grant us the peace of knowing that these sins are completely forgiven. Give us such joy in this forgiveness and the confident expectation of our heavenly home that we may strive to live according to your will, even when we are surrounded by the weeds of wickedness and temptation. We pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Tuesday

Introduction

In the gospel lesson, we saw that Christians must live side-by-side with non-Christians until Judgment Day. In the epistle lesson from 1 Peter, we learn how Christians should react to this situation and how they can expect the sinful world to respond.

1 Peter 4:1-8

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin.² As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.³ For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.⁴ They think it strange that you do not plunge with them

into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. ⁵ But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶ For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit. ⁷ The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. ⁸ Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

Questions for Discussion

- “Be in the world, but not of the world.” How does this phrase relate to what Peter is talking about?

Christians have no choice but to be “in the world,” surrounded by sinful people and influences. And yet as Peter says, Christians must never be “of the world,” incorporating the sin of the world around them into their own lives. Christians must not live to feed their own desires as the world does, “but rather [live] for the will of God.”

- List some reasons why we Christians so often fail to separate ourselves from the sinful things around us. Which of these reasons does Peter mention?

1) The sin around us looks fun or enjoyable to join in on, 2) it requires too much effort to resist the temptations, 3) we won’t stand out or be ridiculed if we just go along with the sins of others. Peter mentions “evil human desires” (number 1), but focuses on number 3, saying that when Christians refuse to be a part of the sins of the world, unbelievers will “heap abuse on them.”

- Too often we have joined with the sins of unbelievers instead of avoiding them. We often look more like weeds than wheat! Yet why don’t we have to be afraid that God will just group us together with the unbelievers on the Last Day and burn us in hell?

Jesus lived a life that perfectly avoided sin at all times (think about how he resisted the devil’s temptations in Matthew 4:1-11), and he used that perfect life to cover over our imperfect lives, so that when God looks at our lives he sees only the perfect life of Jesus. Jesus also took the punishment we deserved for joining in with sin by offering himself to be condemned to hell for all the times we failed to avoid sin in our lives.

- In what areas of your life do you fear the abuse that unbelievers might heap upon you for refusing to go along with their sins? How does Jesus give you the power to overcome those fears?

Answers may vary for the first question. When I see how greatly Jesus loved me, greatly enough to suffer hell for me, that makes me want to devote my life to him. In response to his love for me, I begin to care more about what Jesus thinks of me than about what other people think of me. Enduring abuse for Jesus becomes something that I want to do to show him my love, rather than something that I fear.

Closing Meditation

“The end of all things is near,” Peter says. For us, the wheat, that is a wonderful thought. Soon all the suffering and abuse we endure here on earth will end when the angels harvest us and bring us into the storeroom of heavenly bliss. But have you thought about what that means for the weeds? For those people who do not believe in Jesus? That means that they do not have much time left before the angels cut them down, bundle them up, and toss them into the everlasting fires of hell. So while we definitely want to stand out from the rest of the sinful world to show our love to Jesus, we also want to stand out so that we have the opportunity to draw the attention of unbelievers to ourselves and then to our Savior, who is the only one able to save them from hell. May this burning desire to save souls give us all the more reason to be willing to stand out!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, no suffering was too great for you to endure if it meant that sinners like us could spend our eternity with you. Stir in us such love and appreciation for your sacrifice that we resolve to follow your will no matter what may come our way. As we stand out for you, use us to bring others to faith in your saving name as well. Amen.

Wednesday

Introduction

Many people today think that because God is loving, he would never send anyone to hell. These people forget, however, that God is also a just God who hates sin and cannot tolerate sinners in his presence. The prophet Joel speaks of the coming Day of Judgment as a sickle harvesting the crop, using the same imagery Jesus did in the gospel lesson. The wheat and the weeds will one day be harvested and separated. But while Jesus’ parable only mentions Judgment Day as a future event, Joel fast-forwards us to that day and describes in greater detail what will happen on it.

Joel 3:12-16

¹² “Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side. ¹³ *Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.* Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness!” ¹⁴ Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. ¹⁵ The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. ¹⁶ The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.

Questions for Discussion

- Joel encourages people to live their lives in view of Judgment Day. If you knew that Judgment Day was coming later on tonight, how would you have lived your life differently this past week?

We probably would have focused our attention on God’s Word more and tried harder to follow his will and avoid sin. And yet since we too easily lose sight of Judgment Day, we often grow lazy in our love for God’s Word and in our fight against sin. Let us confess this spiritual laziness to God.

- Think about how dreadfully Judgment Day is described. The Lord’s voice will thunder and roar, all people will be gathered into the Valley of Jehoshaphat (literally, “The Valley of the Lord’s Judgment”), and the sun, moon, and stars will go black. Unbelievers are described as juicy grapes that God will crush in his winepress, and Revelation 14:20 adds the gruesome detail that their blood will come gushing out. Yet even in the midst of all these terrible events, why will we, the Lord’s people, have no reason to fear?

Because the Lord promises to be a refuge and a stronghold for his people (v.16b). On that Day, the Lord will not seem terrifying to us at all, but rather comforting and reassuring. We can run to him and be safe! Because all our sins are covered by Jesus’ blood, the Lord will not throw us into the crushing winepress of his wrath, but rather will welcome us into his heaven with open arms.

- How does Joel’s description of Judgment Day affect the way we go about our lives as Christians in an ungodly world?

When we see just how gruesome the Last Day will be for unbelievers, we will be all the more diligent to strengthen our faith with God’s Word and separate ourselves from sinful influences that harm our faith. We will also be eager to spare others from this horrible fate by warning them to repent of their deadly sins and directing them to trust in Jesus as the only one who can save them on the great Day of Judgment.

Closing Meditation

Christians often do not like to think about what will happen on Judgment Day because it is such a scary and uncomfortable subject. Yet that is precisely why God tells us about the final day of wrath and judgment – to make us uncomfortable. Because we are so prone to lazily falling into sin, we need the grisly reminder of how great the punishment for sin really is. And yet at the very first instant that the fear of God’s judgment in hell grips us, the Holy Spirit rushes in and turns our head toward the cross, where we see our Savior suffering every last flame of hell that those sins deserve. Yes, there was hell to pay, but Jesus paid it for us. Even so, hell should still make us uncomfortable, because every day sinful souls die who have not been covered in the blood of Jesus. Knowing their fate urges us and makes us bold to share Jesus with them no matter how uncomfortable it may be, so that our Savior from hell may be their Savior too. God grant us hearts that resemble his own, hearts that yearn to see souls saved!

Closing Prayer

Lord God, with you no sin can dwell, because you are sinless and holy. We praise you for sending your Son Jesus to remove our sin so that we need not fear your dreadful judgment. Grant that we may always live our lives in the light of the Last Day, that we may faithfully hear your Word, follow your will, and strive to make Jesus’ salvation known to the dying souls we meet. We ask this in the name of your Son, our dear Savior Jesus, Amen.

Thursday

Introduction

Jesus compares the Christian’s life in this sinful world to wheat living among weeds. Just as wheat, on its own, is unable to protect itself from being choked by the weeds, so the Christian, on his or her own, is unable to protect his or her faith from being choked by the sinful, evil influences of this world. For this reason, we are greatly encouraged by Paul’s words in Romans:

Romans 8:26-27

²⁶In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. ²⁷And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.

Questions for Discussion

- What kinds of things do you normally pray for?

Answers will vary. Likely we usually pray for things that we want, including prayers for God to remove some difficulty from our lives or help us endure a challenge. If our prayers are only (or almost only) of this sort, however, that reveals a selfishness we must repent of. But we may also pray prayers of thanksgiving for blessings received or prayers on behalf of others.

- What kinds of things do you think Jesus usually prayed for? Why is that comforting?

John chapter 17 gives us a good example of what Jesus' prayer life looked like. Jesus' prayers centered not around his own desires, but around God's will. Jesus prayed that his Father would protect his disciples' faith and strengthen them with the Word. He also prayed that many others would come to faith through the disciples' message and enjoy unified fellowship with each other and with God.

This is comforting not only because we know Jesus prayed for us, but also because Jesus' perfect prayer life covers over our sinful and imperfect prayer lives. Yes, we even needed a Savior who would pray perfectly in our place to save us!

- As we consider our lives as wheat among weeds, what earnest prayer (which the Holy Spirit graciously "fills in" for us through his intercessions on our behalf) might we add to our other prayers?

We ought to pray, as Jesus did, that the Lord would keep us steadfast in our faith even as we are subjected to the harmful influences of the world's weeds. We should pray that the Lord not allow our faith to be choked, so that we might at last be gathered into the storehouse of heaven. This is what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer when we ask, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Closing Meditation

Imagine that a man had an uncle who was a billionaire. One day the uncle calls him and says, "I'm feeling really generous today. Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." What would you think if that man replied, "I guess I'll have \$20 if you don't mind"? What an inappropriate request! The man could have asked for something far greater! And yet, don't we often do the same thing to God? In his Word, God tells us that nothing is impossible for him, and yet too often we only pray for him to fix our minor problems and concerns without asking him to

do the great things, such as preserving our faith to the end, leading unbelievers to believe in him, or even enabling us to speak boldly about Jesus to our friends and acquaintances and so lead them to Jesus. God proved he could do what seems impossible when he worked out a way to get us sinners into heaven with him. Let's remember the next time we pray that God still does seemingly impossible things. Ask him not only for the little things, but for the big things too!

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are weak, but you are strong. We praise you for sending your Holy Spirit into our hearts to pray on our behalf for things we do not know to pray for. Protect us as we live here on earth, that our faith may never fail, but rather always cling tightly to you. Grant your Holy Spirit to all Christians, that they too may persevere in faith to the end and lead many more to faith in your Son, even those who live in distant lands. Protect your church from every attack of Satan, and when the Last Day comes, gather all your faithful people to yourself in the glories of heaven. We ask all this through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Friday

Introduction

If anyone would have felt the impact of life lived as wheat among weeds, it would have been David. While the weeds Jesus describes can be understood as evil people or influences that tempt us to stray from the faith, they can also be understood as any kind of evil coming from the unbelieving world which causes believers to suffer. David especially had to withstand many weeds of this latter sort in his lifetime. As a boy, he engaged in a death match with the Philistine war hero Goliath. As a young man, King Saul ruthlessly hunted David as if he were an enemy of the state guilty of treason. As king, David was constantly engaged in warfare with enemy nations. He even endured treason from his own son Absalom and other enemies within Israel. Yet the Lord delivered David from it all. It is likely that David wrote Psalm 18 towards the end of his life, extolling the Lord for delivering him from a lifetime of danger and evil.

Psalm 18

(These selected verses from the psalm are taken from *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, p.69. The family is invited to read the entire psalm from the Bible if they desire.)

²The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. ^{16a}He reached down from on high and took hold of me; ^{17a}he rescued me from my powerful enemy. ¹⁹He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted

in me. ²⁸ You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light. ²⁷ You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty. ³⁵ You give me your shield of victory, and your right hand sustains me.

Questions for Discussion

- What things in your life do you fear the most? How do you react when these things assault you?

Answers may vary. We might react in a variety of ways – attempting to avoid what we fear, pretending it doesn't bother us, lashing out at people, talking about it with a close friend, etc. And yet if we neglect to take it to the Lord in prayer, meditate on his promises of love and care he gives in his Word, and trust in him to help us, then we are dishonoring God by treating him as if he had no power to save us.

- Jean Guichard is a French photographer who specializes in lighthouses. This is one of his most famous photographs of a lighthouse called *La Jument*. Notice the lighthouse keeper standing at the door of the lighthouse. Explain why, in the light of Psalm 18, Christians can find such comfort in a photograph like this.



This photograph is a powerful visual reminding us of the words, “The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge” (v.2). Just as the lighthouse keeper has confidence that the lighthouse will shield him from the terrifying wave, so we can have confidence that our God will shield us from the terrors and evils we must face in this world, no matter how big or how small they may be. Since the Lord has rescued us from our greatest enemy – our sin that would have condemned us to hell – we have every reason to run to him for protection against the other terrors we face in this life as well.

Closing Meditation

The loss of a job. The rejection of friends. A ruined relationship. The death of a loved one. The depths of depression. Unbearable stress. Health failure. The threat of war. A cruel boss, co-worker, or classmate. The list could go on. Life on this earth is not for the faint of heart. Like David, we are often assaulted from all sides with all kinds of terrible things. Living as wheat among weeds is painful. That is why it is so comforting for us to listen to David, a battered believer, look back on his life and tell us what got him through. It was none other than the Lord, his Rock and ours. May the reassuring promise of the Lord always ring in our ears: “‘Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,’ says the Lord, who has compassion on you” (Isaiah 54:10).

Closing Prayer

- What fear, worry, or concern will you take to the Lord your Rock today?

(Each person may think of one on their own and then share with the group if they feel comfortable doing so. Then let those who wish take turns saying a prayer to the Lord for whatever may be on their heart.)