

Family **Worship**

by Philip Venables

We, as Christians, are called to engage in the appreciation of our God; we are called to worship. There are two particular areas which we tend to emphasise as being critically important in our worship; we worship God in church and and we worship God individually. However, there is an area for worship, which we tend to ignore and avoid, and that is in the family. There is a missing jewel in our worship and that missing jewel is “family worship”.

When growing up in evangelical circles, I look back and perceive that the message given was one that it was good and beneficial to do family worship, but it did not really matter that much. The more I have thought about it, the more I have come to conclude that it is a vital part of Christian living. Accordingly, my goal in writing this article is to encourage everyone to ponder upon this vital ministry and how they can participate in it.

The Importance Of Family

Let us get straight to the scriptures and see how important the family is to the LORD.

Psalm 78 :1-8 reads:

**My people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth with a parable;
I will utter hidden things, things from of old—
things we have heard and known,
things our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their descendants;
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 ancestors
to teach their children,
so that 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.
They would not be like their ancestors—
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
whose hearts were not loyal to God,
whose spirits were not faithful to him.**

And in Joshua 24:15 we read this commitment of Joshua **But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.'**

As we consider these scriptures, we start to engage with the fact that God has a particular interest in families coming together to interact with Him. This is with the goal that His ways will be passed on to the next generation.

Joshua tells us not only of his own desire to serve the Lord, but the desire that his whole family would serve the LORD. In Psalm 78 David has this longing that the great teachings and truths of God will be passed on to the next generations. This would lead them to put their trust in God.

Immediately we are led to ask the question how will this passing on of the truth take place? How is it that households and oncoming generations will have an experience of God? No doubt this should be happening in the normal happenings of family life. However, there should also be those times when the family draws together before God's throne to worship Him and hear from Him through His Word.

What Is It That We Are Considering?

It is the drawing together of the family (household) to spend a time together acknowledging God. It involves a specific time when the Word of God is read, the praise of God is sung and prayer to God is made. It does not always have to include all of those things, but that is the normal expectation of what takes place when there is family worship.

In Joshua 24:24 the word serve has the idea of giving honour to someone; acknowledging their superiority and working for them. When we come together as families to worship God in the family we are doing Joshua 24:24 type activity.

Why Family Worship?

1. God has a particular interest in families and in Himself being known in families. We have already had a flavour of this in Psalm 78 and Joshua 24, but let us underline some of the pertaining issues:
 - The most fundamental unit of society as originally intended by God is the family. He determined that Adam and Eve were bound together so as to form a family unit, and that children were brought into that unit. When the family is going well, the church is going well and society is going well.
 - There is this interesting phrase in Ephesians 3:14-15: **For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.** Paul has been speaking about the wonderful way God works in forming a people for Himself in His church (see Eph. 3:1-13), and then he breaks out into this eulogising over God. It is as if God, by forming a people in the church, is doing that which is patterned after what He did in forming beings in heaven, and people on earth in families.

The church is the core unit for God working to glorify His Name and His Son on this planet. Churches are to be formed to be like His original creation of gathering human beings into families. Surely families then should be places like churches are meant to be, where the worship of God takes place.

- The Ephesians passage also introduces us into the theme about how there are families in heaven. In a sense the ultimate family is the trinity. God is known in trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So a family when entering into family worship enters into something of the heavenly happenings of the ultimate family; that of God Himself.

- When God promised to bring blessing through Abraham He said **I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.** (Gen12:3). All groupings of peoples achieve a state of blessing through the seed connected back to Abraham, namely or Lord Jesus. God delights to work through groupings of people and one of those key groupings is the family. The Lord works His blessing through families. And blessed people should gather to worship together.
- Also we should listen to this verse concerning when God brings a time of blessing. **'At that time,' declares the Lord, 'I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people.'** (Jer. 31:1). When the people of God are knowing the blessing of God they are knowing it in families, and so it should be for us. The blessings we have in Christ should be seen in our families.

2. Life is lived in families. Family worship gives the great link between the church and the individual. Jonathan Edwards, in his farewell sermon to his church in Northampton, Massachusetts said :- *“Every Christian family ought to be as it were a little church, consecrated to Christ, and wholly influenced and governed by His rules”*. So Christianity is not just out there at church or in here, in me, as an individual, it is to be displayed in the family. Family worship should not need to be argued for, it should be a normal part of all Christian families.

3. It shows our faith in the realities of life. Family worship gives a powerful testimony to Christianity being embedded in the realities of life.

We can all put on a show in our workplaces, communities, and even in church, but in the family we are who we are. In the family everyone sees everyone for who they are. When we are engaging in family worship we are showing that we want the Bible in the realities of life. We want to know God here. When parents gather their family for worship they are sending out a big message to their family. *“We want to honour God here”*, they are saying.

4. It enables you to fulfil the commandment about teaching your children the statutes of the faith. In Deuteronomy 6:7 we read the call of God to parents concerning his commandments to **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.**

When you have family worship you have an established means in family life whereby you can accomplish this. You are sitting down and you are turning to scripture. Some might say that we should just let it happen in the general flow of life. My response is that life tends to just flow past you and it tends not to happen. Regular organised family worship, in a sense, gives a trip wire which forces us to

be bringing the truth of God into our families. We should make every effort to make sure that family worship is an integral part of family life.

5. We should be thinking of our homes as places where disciples for Christ are being formed. *“If every family in every church got serious about making disciples in the home it would change our world.”* (taken from Winfield Bevins, A quick guide to family worship).

We should not be thinking that disciples of Jesus just happen or that discipleship is the responsibility of the church. Through family worship children are taught the Word, but are also taught how to handle the Word. They should be also be taught how the Word relates to everyday life. This is disciple-making.

6. One of the most profound reasons why you will want to bring family worship into your family is because you passionately care about the spiritual welfare of your children. You want to take every opportunity to bring the Word into their lives. You also want them to know that you are praying for them. They will hear you pray for them. By having a time for God every day as a family you have eternity invading your daily life everyday. Accordingly every day they are reminded of the most important realities, that of God and eternity.
7. Simply and most profoundly it honours God. What does the first commandment say? Consider the Word from Matthew 22:35- 38 **One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment.** Every time we get together as a family to acknowledge God we are saying: *“you matter in a big way to us Lord”*. We are thereby keeping the first of the two summary commandments.

How?

There are two key pole-stars that we should have in mind when we come to arranging and participating in family worship. These are:-

- **Engagement** - We are to make sure that we engage with those who are participating in family worship. This requires thought and consideration. If you have younger ones there, then you must make sure that they can take-in and relate to, at least part of, what is happening in your worship time.
- **Energy** - This particularly applies to the parents. If you do not approach family time with enthusiasm and a demonstrable commitment to it, then very likely the rest of the family will be somewhat 'turned off' by the whole experience.

Accordingly, with those two motivations driving us let us look at some of the details of how we arrange family worship.

You need to remember what you are doing. You are gathering as a group of people, of mixed backgrounds, abilities and spiritual situations, to come to worship God. So as you come to worship you are thinking about who is there and what you are doing.

You are there to worship God, but in such a way as is meaningful to those who are gathered. But what exactly do you do in family worship?

Two essential things would be to read scripture and to pray. I would say those are the basics. In reading scripture you have to seek to act appropriately for all who are gathered. So reading five chapters of Leviticus when there are those under eight years old there, is not likely to be wisest thing to do!

The way that family worship is conducted also depends upon the experience and gifting of the one leading the worship. If the head of the home is a new Christian, who is not used to leading worship then they must not make the arrangement and structure of the worship too demanding. Similarly, the family may be seeking to install family worship as a new thing in family life. In such a situation there must not be undue pressure exerted by doing too much. To start with, it is more than sufficient to read a few verses from Scripture with no comments and then have a prayer.

Comments can then be introduced as appropriate. Preparation before the worship time can be useful. The use of helps, such as a commentary or other resources are worth considering. These can be used as aids in preparation and/or in family worship itself. Ryles Expository Thoughts on the Gospels can still be most useful in giving helpful and understandable material. In seeking to develop the study of the word and worship of the Lord, it is good to think about asking questions of those present. Of course, in such a situation you need to remember that your questions should be of such a level as to be understandable by those present.

It is the Father who should take the lead. It is he who initiates. He is the leader in the house. He should gather everyone together so as to worship God. If there is no Father then the Mother has to take the lead, she gets everyone together.

So when should you do it? To which I reply: when is convenient in your household? It may be best in the morning or the evening. Think about what is best for your situation. Whenever, it is I would say thirty minutes is a maximum per day. However, you need to be aware that it is not the amount of time that matters, but effective time. In respect of the general arrangements it is good to think about making it regular and in the same place. Children respond well to this; they like things that are familiar. Family worship can then be built into being as part of their routine as it is established in the family routine.

It is important to be flexible In your arrangements. There may be times when people have commitments to get to. To frustrate those present through having an extended family time whilst they are committed to being elsewhere is unthoughtful. Moreover, it does not make it a time of worship, rather it becomes a time of annoyance for many. So be flexible.

Try to make sure that there are no disturbances. If you have your family worship times as a set routine in the arrangement of your family then everyone gets used to setting that time aside to be with the Lord. One tip is to not answer the phone during family worship.

We should always pray about our family worship that it would be used for the Lord's honour and glory and the blessing of those present.

Other things to think about doing are:-

- Singing. We are there to worship God and we have something to sing about. So it can be good to sing. If there no musical instruments have a go at singing without music.
- Do catechisms. These involve learning through 'Question and answer' booklets.
- Do memory verses. It is so good to get the scriptures into our minds.
- Follow prayer guides so as to direct your praying.

Here is the approach we broadly adopt as a family:-

- We set ourselves morning and evening on a Monday to Friday to engage in family worship.
- In the morning we do this whilst sat at the dining table but before we eat breakfast. We read a portion from the New Testament, sometimes with a brief comment, and then I lead in prayer.
- In the evening we generally have what we call "Family Time" after our evening meal. Here we read from the Old Testament. We also pray together. Sometimes we have open prayer; sometimes all six of us pray. We will sing on occasion.

Who should be involved?

God is interested in households. The way Abraham took responsibility for those in his care is instructive to us.

On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, and his son Ishmael was thirteen; Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that very day. And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him (Gen. 17:23-27).

Abraham took responsibility for all those gathered in his care and so should we. Accordingly, I suggest that the whole of the household should be involved. Obviously there are exceptions; perhaps someone is ill, or people are out or away. In a sense, if there are just two in the house they are engaging in family worship. So children should be being born into a family where there is already family worship. There should not be a time when children have not known the family gathering together to worship the LORD together.

Objections

You might respond to all the detail above and say that "*I just can't do it!*" If that is the case then, I suggest, you have to think about how you are going to overcome this barrier. Here are a few thoughts:

- Get someone to help and guide you as regards to what you might do.
- Go to someone's home and see how they do their family worship. Also talk to others about it. You need to remember you do not have to do too much. One thought is to use what you plan to do for family study for your own quiet time.

- If you think that *“life is just too busy, I do not have time to do family worship”* then perhaps you need to trim things from your life. Family worship needs to have a priority. It is so very important for the life of your family, so put it high in your priorities. There is a phrase 'where-there-is-a-will-there-is-a-way' and this applies in worshipping together as a family. Accordingly, if say the Father is away a lot of the time or there are other eventualities, you may have to think “outside-of-the-box”. Use Skype for example if that is a way to make things happen.
- Some might say that their children are too diverse in age. This raises issues as regards to being sensitive to those there. But remember that all can sing and all can listen to Word of God. But if you do have a yelling baby don't just carry on for the sake of it, because if no-one can hear you are achieving very little.

Finally here, as regards objections, may I say that not doing family worship can reveal your laziness and even lack of zeal for the LORD. You have to be Joshua-like and say: *“we are going to do it”*. And then get on with the hard work and see the benefits to be reaped. Which nicely leads us on to the benefits of family worship.

Benefits.

- Your children are led to know that the honouring of God permeates the whole of your life. If you fail to have family worship you exist with a spiritual gap between the individual and church. Family worship fills that gap. There is worship not just in church and on your own, but as a family.
- You are showing your children that the Word of God matters to you. You need to remember that children learn so much by observation. So, for the youngest ones it may not be what they are actually learning, but it is the impressions that are being borne upon their souls that are so important. They know that the Word of God must mean a lot to you because you continually read it to them.
- Talking about spiritual things becomes a natural part of your family life. Interacting with the children through family worship gets them used to talking about the deep things of life and eternity. All this helps in the developing of a natural close relationship of the parents with the children in which spiritual things are a part.
- You are training your children to be able to benefit from the corporate worship of the people of God in Church. They learn to sit and listen. Moreover through the family worship experience singing is not thought of as a “cringe thing”! Rather, it is something that happens naturally.
- You are covering so many things in the Bible as you go through the Scriptures naturally. Accordingly, their minds are being formed in a biblical way. Biblical themes are permeating their thinking.
- You develop a good conscience before that Lord in that you are fulfilling your biblical mandate. In this, the words of Ephesians 6:4 are pertinent **Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.** You are bringing them up in His training and instruction by having family worship.

- You are kept alert as regards to your own godliness. You are “up-close-and-personal” with the Word of God, and your children are onlookers. They will soon detect any hypocrisy. So you are forced to repent of your sin. Spiritually your life before God is not just a personal thing, neither is it just a church thing. Rather, it is a very real thing in the nitty-gritty of life as it is expressed in the family.
- Family worship keeps the family together. The family is brought together before God. There is something binding in the purposes of God, in studying the Word and praying together.
- There is a great protection in it all because you are bringing your family under the shadow of the Lords' protective care through family worship. Thomas Brooks said. *'A family without prayer is like a house without a roof'*. Your family is left very vulnerable if there is no collective praise.
- You are preparing the next generation for knowing the Lord and serving Him. Here we go back to Psalm 78 and God's great call to pass on the baton of grace to the next generation. Family Worship is a crucial facet of that. So many children from Christian families do not go on for the Lord; I am left wondering if this is because there is no family worship in the home.
- The father re-enforces his lead in the family. This is not in a forced way, but it is in a natural and real way. The father is seen to be the head. It is he who simply says “let us come together for family-time” or whatever phrase is used in your family. He organises, and the family forms around that. The wife is at his side. The children are comfortable under their protector-ship. This all provided a particular way in which the father can gently, but in a real way establish his authority in the family. He is the leader after all. To quote Joel Beeke: *As goes the father so goes the home and so goes the church*.
- It encourages the children who are in Christ to speak of Him. They are used to speaking about Him before others.
- Through family worship the family is taught that Christianity is not just about adopting some moral framework in to our lives, it is about being worshippers of the true and living God. **Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth** (John 4:23-24) is the Word of our Saviour. Family worship helps us to make those worshippers.
- The family is bound together around common knowledge. Each are hearing the same things. Therefore there is a sense of collective identity. Each has heard the same thing.
- It means we are not always fire fighting issues. The Word is dealing with things before they arise. The family are being taught the truth. Through the Word the parents are teaching the children what behaviour is pleasing to God. But the parents should never forget that they are under the Word as well.

- Teaches humility. Sometimes you will be asked something by the children and you will not know the answer. Whereupon you have to say something like *“I do not know, let's seek to find out.”*
- Family worship helps the home to be centred on Christ. As you are unfolding the truth of God's Word you are unfolding the ways of God's grace into the lives of the children. And such grace focusses on our Saviour. **You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich** (2 Cor. 8:9) is how Paul represents the grace demonstrated in and through our Saviour. What an opportunity is provided through gathering the family together around the Word and around the Lord to introduce them to our beautiful Saviour.

Conclusion

Lets us conclude with some remarks to coalesce all that we have been considering regarding this great subject of family worship.

- God is supremely interested in passing things on to the next generation. Are we so interested?
- Life is passing away! Are we praying for and longing for the ongoing work of God on this earth. Read through the beginning of 1 Chronicles and see how as the generations passed away, new generations were raised up and established. What are we doing to pass on the baton of grace?
- What better way is there for children to get used to reading than in reading the Word of God as a family. We as a family normally “read round” with each of us reading a verse. For the younger ones we have started off by giving them an easy verse, gradually they become part of the reading.
- As I look back I wish had had done more to encourage the developing of this ministry in the Church. It is so vital for seeing the faith established among us.
- When Richard Baxter saw great transformation of the community in Kidderminster in seventeenth century, one of the key motors for this change was the widespread adoption of family worship among the people.
- In recent times family worship has been the missing jewel in the life of the people of God. Happily, I think there is now more interest in it as people realise its value.
- It is my observation that where families are found worshipping the Lord together the children have gone on to serve the Lord and live for Him. They have seen that God is real in the home and God has used this for their good.
- It is no good just expecting the church to train our children in the ways of God. No, God gives children into families.

Finally let us ask ourselves this question: What do we want for our children? Do you want them to have good jobs, or lots of money, or do you share something of the heart of the lady in 2 John. In 2 John 4 we read **It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.** Oh may we have such a heart and may we use family worship as a part of our labours to this end.

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