



11 KEYS

to Starting
FAMILY DEVOTIONS

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I haven't always been a family devotion guy.



It's not because I didn't want or aspire to be; I did. But we went a long time as a family before pulling the trigger and trying to integrate this practice into the regular rhythm of our family life.

There are a lot of reasons, I think, for my delay. Part of it was convenience; I wasn't ready to alter our schedule to accommodate that 15 or 20 minutes. Part of it was nervousness; I wasn't sure if I could do this well. But the biggest part of the reason for my procrastination was really about getting having a clear direction of getting started.

By God's grace, we've been doing morning devotions together for about 5 years now – long enough for this practice to be ingrained in our regular routine. It's a long road, as are most things with young children I'm finding out. Though revival doesn't break out every morning over eggs and toast, our continued hope and prayer is that times like these builds into the love and discipline our children will have in the future when it comes to God's Word.

The goal of this resource, then, is to put forth that simple, clear direction for other parents who, like me, find themselves in a time of procrastination. This guide is organized around principles that over these last few years have proven themselves to be helpful as we've tweaked, changed, and amended our process. I hope it is indeed both clear and helpful for you, as you move another step in leading your family toward Jesus together.



>> Tools



One of the first gifts my dad gave me after we got married was a tool box with a few key tools in it. Then, most every Christmas, he would follow it up with another tool. Sometimes the tools were obvious, like a hammer or screw driver, but other times they were a little more off the beaten path. And though I didn't necessarily have need for all of them at the same time, I have found myself being thankful over the years for that well stocked box.

One of the reasons why we struggle, I think, with family discipleship is that we do not feel adequately equipped. Our tool box is empty, and when it is, it can feel like you're trying to hammer in a nail with your bare hands. It is an exercise in hubris to recreate the wheel for your family when there are simple tools available that can streamline the process and give you a jump start into discipleship.

There are a few such tools that have been very helpful for us over the years. For example, the books *Long Story Short* and *The Jesus Storybook Bible* are very age appropriate and helpful tools that make family devotion time manageable.

What's more, we recently finished a season where we read through an abridged version of *Pilgrim's Progress* together.

The point is you don't have to go at it alone. There are a lot of great tools out there. Start with these, do a little more research, and find the one that best fits the time constraints and the vibe of your home.

>> Holistic Discipleship



There is a saying that some things are better caught than taught. I've found in my personal life that this is particularly true of discipleship. Though consistency is important in terms of establishing a particular time and place in which we teach and pray with our families is important, we should also not neglect the fact that discipleship is not constrained to those moments when we have planned for it to occur.

Real life is the crucible for real discipleship. Life is the classroom for the Holy Spirit. In principle, then, we should look to all of life as an opportunity to disciple our families. When you begin praying for and seeking this holistic view of discipleship, you begin to see that the particular time and place you have picked out to have a family devotion really just sets the stage for other opportunities. When we are with our children, most every moment is a teachable moment. And if we have laid the groundwork with regular time in God's Word together, then we can easily call back on what we have read and prayed about together as we seek to apply those things in real time.

>> Preparation



Preparation is key for beginning and maintaining a family devotion. But I don't mean preparation in the sense that you have spent 2 hours studying the devotion you are going to walk through the next morning (though that's a fine practice if you can manage it).

I mean "preparation" more in the sense of creating the environment. I've found that the more prepared the environment is in advance of beginning your time together, the smoother your time will go. For example, in order to make sure we have time before school for devotions, my wife and I have to get up earlier than we used to. We have to be completely ready for the day with breakfast going with the kids get up at 7 (and they get up at 7 every stinking morning). While it often means that I read through the devotion the night before, it also to a greater extent means doing anything we can do to make the morning run more smoothly. This would be things like making sure lunches are already packed, clothes are laid out, and you haven't left any lingering homework assignments to be done over the eggs and toast.

>> Variety



Most any regular practice becomes stale when it's repeated over and over again. This is especially true when you throw children into the mix. There is a way, then, to maintain consistency and yet at the same time bring in variety in order to keep things fresh.

For us, we try to change things up once a week. Monday through Thursday, we do a Bible study and prayer (probably around 15 minutes), but Friday is different. On Friday, everyone shares one specific thing they are thankful for that week, and one prayer request. For a while, those prayer requests were pretty predictable – that I would have a good day, that I would do well on a test, that I would be kind to friends... that kind of thing. In recent days, we've tried to bring more variety into those prayer requests as well, asking the kids to share a prayer not for themselves but for someone else, or to share something they're thankful for that's not about an activity they get to do that weekend.

For others, it might be that for devotion one morning your family sings together – a truly beautiful practice if you can manage it. Whatever the variety is, consider bringing something new in once a week just to break up what can become monotonous.

>> Humor



One of the great things having a family devotion time does for me, as a parent, is helps me not to take myself too seriously. Every once in a while we will be talking through some great truth from the Bible, I'll be making an incredibly insightful and valuable point in a truly beautiful way... and someone will burp.

Game over. But such is life with kids. And in truth, that's okay. I can't help but think it was a pretty undignified scene when the kids were crawling all over each other to try and get into Jesus' lap, and yet He let them come. Snotty noses and all. Keeping a sense of humor while trying to instill this discipline, in the end, is a helpful reminder that we, as parents, are really stewards of these children. We do the best we can in faith, but ultimately it is only God who convicts of sin and brings our children – any children – to an understanding of the gospel.

So we laugh, and then we go at it again.



Consistency



There's a pattern to everything, a routine for most every part of life. And any time you disrupt that routine, even for the noblest of reasons, there is going to be backlash. So before you get started, you've got to commit to consistency. Decide on the time of day. And keep it at that time. For us, it's 7 am at breakfast. That will likely change in the coming years, but if you don't pick a consistent time then it's doubly difficult to keep the practice going.

Consistency is also important when it comes to the place. Our minds work like this – when we have the same place where we do the same activity, we condition ourselves to assume a certain posture when we are in that place at the correct time.

Consistency in time and place builds the expectation of what is to come, and it also brings about a feeling of loss when for whatever reason the thing that was supposed to happen at that time and place doesn't happen at that time and place. So pick a time. Pick a place. And then stick with it.

>> Faith



A family devotion takes a great deal of faith. More specifically, it takes faith over feelings, because there are many times when we don't feel like doing the devotion. It would be easier to be passive in the conversation instead of actively leading. If, then, we are led by our feelings, then every attempt at instituting this process will indeed fail.

This principle goes beyond family devotions; it's actually core to every spiritual discipline we have in our lives. That's why they're called disciplines – it's because we must act regardless of and many times in contradiction to what we are feeling at a given moment.

The funny thing is that though we might not feel like having a devotion when it begins, if we act in faith anyway, the feelings most always catch up. It just takes them a few minutes. So, parents, believe that the Word of God is powerful and effective. Believe that you are a leader of your family, ordained to steward these children for the sake of the kingdom. Believe, and act accordingly.

>> Patience



God plays the long game. Though we might be born again in a moment, the Holy Spirit does His transformative work over time. Day by day, sometimes imperceptibly, the Spirit conforms us into the image of Christ. Jesus Himself had the wisdom not to unfold the entire plan of redemptive history for His disciples the very first day; instead, He took the long road of gradually teaching and applying and living alongside them.

As parents, we can get in a terrible hurry in the spiritual formation of our kids. If we are to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit, we too must be willing to play the long game. One practical way that fleshes itself out is in how we define the win on a day to day basis.

The win is not that every head is bowed and every eye is closed every single morning; nor is that every kid can perfectly complete the Bible quiz you lay before them. The win is simply that you are opening God's Word together, you are praying together, and you are talking about real life. In these simple actions, over the course of time, God will be faithful to do what only He can do – change the heart.

>> Follow Up



It would be a mistake to think that a family devotion is some kind of magical tool that fixes all your family issues, past, present and future. It doesn't work like that. Rather, the devotion is a means to root your children in God's Word and help them develop a pattern of discipline for the future. There will come a day for you, as there will for me, when our children are largely out of our control. One of the best things we can do for them is to instill the deep belief that God's Word actually speaks to us, and that God can be trusted and known through how we embrace that Word.

For this reason, one of the best things we can do is to not isolate the family devotion time as the single spiritual moment we have in the day. Instead, think of the devotion as a launching point. Follow up throughout the day. As your children give you prayer requests, ask them about those prayer requests. Celebrate how God answered them, and talk about what happened if He didn't answer in the way you prayed.

Not only that, but think of how what you are reading in Scripture actually applies to your own life. Perhaps one morning you will read from the Sermon on the Mount about how Jesus' followers are meek. And maybe you will have the opportunity at dinner that night to talk about how the Lord brought that verse to your mind at some point in your day. Through following up like this, you are showing your kids that the devotion is as important to you as it is to them, and that it's not merely an intellectual exercise.

» Passing off Leadership



We aren't to this point yet, but I sense that one of the ways our devotions need to grow in the future is through the passing off of leadership. This is a very biblical thing – that spiritual maturity is not only marked by our intellectual knowledge, but in how we are empowering others to make disciples on their own.

As your kids learn and grow, consider giving one day a week to them, when they are responsible for leading devotion. Teach them how to use the tools that you use. Encourage them to take on the mantle of leadership for themselves, and participate in the questions and answers as you would expect them to if you were leading.

It will be immensely joyous when, not too long from now, by God's grace my son is the one holding the Bible and reading from it to our family over our Eggos.

>> Don't Give Up



There are spiritual moments with your children that are paper thin, and they don't seem to happen that often. It's those times when you really sense they are understanding the nature of sin and our great need for forgiveness, and then they're thinking about Pokemon again. Paper thin moments, but they're there. It's these moments that help reinforce that the Holy Spirit is indeed at work in them, and it's those moments that are gifts to help us keep going.

Like the time not that long ago when we were in the book of Joshua talking through the story of Rahab. If you're unfamiliar with the story, it's an incredible gospel-laced account of a woman of questionable reputation who was saved from destruction. And how was she saved? Because she put a red rope on her door, marking her house to be spared. And the lights came on for the kids:

"Do you guys remember any other people that put something red on their doors?"

"Yeah. Like when that angel killed people."

"Correct. It was the Passover. And why was that called the Passover?"

"Because the angel passed over their houses."

"And what did the Israelite army do to Rahab's house?"

"They passed over it."

And so on it went, eventually to remind us that the wrath of God passes over us because our lives are marked with something red – the blood of Jesus. The kids thought this was genuinely exciting, and they felt genuinely smart because they saw how it all fit together.

They are watching. They are learning. They are being formed.
So press on, parents, for your work is not in vain.

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