Keeping the Family Altar Burning

~Sherwin Brougher

It is no secret. We live in a busy age. Even secular articles address it. I was reading an article where the author was concerned with the amount of distractions people are willing to involve themselves in while driving. These activities include eating, cell phone conversing, studying for tests etc. The article went on to conclude that everyone has too much to do and they are finding ways to save time instead of giving full attention to driving. Who of us would not have to raise our hand and confess we have been guilty of some of the same things in order to save time?

Satan wants us to be too busy for things that really matter in life. "Because iniquity shall abound the love of many shall wax cold" (Matt. 24:12). We naturally go the wrong way. If we fail to devote special time for keeping ourselves refueled with the Word of God and our relationship with Jesus Christ vibrant, our love will wax cold. It is generally a slow process but that is what Satan wants.

When we are very busy, one area we tend to look at, as not being very important and possibly easy to skip is family devotions. When the father's job takes him away from home early in the morning, it is nearly impossible to have family devotions every day because we often have plans on various evenings of the week. The challenge I would like to give myself is that I would make use of every opportunity God has given me to teach my children the Word of God.

This perspective is from one with young children, so certainly those who raised children through teenage years may have even more helpful insights. However, the principals we want to look at will be the same.

1. **We must view our children as a field prepared for seed.** "Give ye ear and hear my voice, hearken, and hear my speech. Doth the plowman plow all day to sow? Doth be open and break the clods of his ground? When he hath made plain the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the fitches and scatter the cumin and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rye in their place. For his God doth instruct him to discretion and doth teach him" (Isa 28:23-26).

One would think it a little strange for a farmer to plow his field, then disk and culti-pack it to break up the clods and get the soil loosened up but would then just leave it lay. The rain would soon come, weeds would begin to grow, and it would soon become unfit to plant good seed in.

I work in excavation as an occupation. We feel successful when we get the topsoil graded and the landscaper follows immediately behind us, seeding and strawing the fluffy ground before rain comes.

Can we have such a vision for our children? We have only a small window of time to plant good seeds in their hearts and minds. If we are not active in planting good seeds while we have opportunity, the rain will come and instead of a beautiful crop it will be a life full of weeds. The ground will be hard and crusty on top.

Family devotions may seem insignificant at times. But with a mentality that we have only

a small window of time from when the ground is worked and ready for seed until the first rain comes, we will make every effort to plant good seeds while we have opportunity. Family devotions will then be seen as an opportunity instead of a must do.

It is intriguing to note how some people can look at a situation and say it is unnecessary, the same situation to another person looks like a large mountain, and yet another person looks at it and says it is an opportunity. Let's take up the challenge to look at family devotions as an opportunity God has given us.

2. **The father or husband's responsibility in family devotions.** "And ye Fathers provoke not your children to wrath but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). "The Father to the children shall make known thy truth" (Isa 38:19b).

The Bible is clear that the father is responsible to lead in family life. He is responsible to supply the physical needs of his family. The Bible is also very clear that the father is responsible to teach his children in the ways of truth. We need to take that responsibility seriously.

I have a concern for myself and for other fathers that we are able to reach our children and talk to them and help them through the heart issues of life. It is very easy for fathers to teach their children all kinds of things about hunting, farming, mechanics, etc. and fail to teach them in the sensitive issues. Youth yearn to have answers to life's issues as fathers, are we doing our job?

What does this have to do with family devotions? I believe the father who sees the importance of teaching his children about the real heart issues of life will also be a father who sees family devotions as an opportunity.

As a leader in the home, it is father's responsibility to make it happen. set an appointed time that works best with your family schedule. Lead the family in singing, Bible reading and prayer. It is also father's responsibility to keep devotions inter-esting. Certainly, others in the family can contribute, but if it is a boring, meaningless time; it is probably the father's fault.

3. **The mother or wife's responsibilities in family devotions**. The best thing a wife can do is support her husband as the scriptures say. Be one who maintains a positive attitude toward your husband's aspirations and goals for family devotions. sing heartily and add inspiration in any way you can. Children should also hear their mother pray, not necessarily every time, but it should not be uncommon.

As fathers in the home, we should ask for our wife's insight on what would make our family devotions more interesting etc. Let's look at it as a team effort. We all know that one persons ideas get boring after a while, but when we look at it as a team effort and as an opportunity, our family devotions can be a family highlight.

4. **How to keep family devotions interesting**. It is very easy to get in a rut. It is easy to do the same thing every time, in the same order, with the same expression, and family devotions can become an endurance test for the children rather than a highlight. Did you ever notice how creative

Jesus was when He was on earth? When Jesus wanted to prove a point He mostly included a parable. Were all of his parables easy to understand? Not necessarily, but he knew how to keep the people's attention. He knew how to keep it interesting. When God created the earth He could have given us a boring place to live with only bare necessities, but He didn't. He created so many things that man is still discovering them today, yet everything has a part to play.

We are not God, but God has given us a creative mind with which to reason and think.

My wife and I discussed several times about buying Bible storybooks to read in family devotions to help bring it down to the level a young child can understand. A complete set of those books is rather expensive and the other question is "Is it right to replace the Bible with a Bible storybook. What are we teaching our children by using a Bible storybook instead of the Bible?" If we were very poor and lived three hundred years ago, these questions would probably not even come to us. We would just be so glad to have a Bible from which to read. The problem we have today is that we can have everything pre-digested. It takes very little of our own thinking or stirring of our minds to read a Bible story which someone else has already enhanced with their thinking.
Bible story books have their place but could we agree that the Bible should not be replaced in family devotions? If Dad must resort to a Bible story book to be able to tell a Bible story in an interesting way, isn't he telling his children that the Bible is just a little boring? The attitude that we as parents have about the Bible rubs off on our children and affects how they look at the Bible in the future.
Take the story of Jonah and the whale. We could simply read it as it is in the Bible, not adding any expression or details, and small children will likely retain little of it. Or we could read it with expression using hand motions; stopping every few verses to explain some details to make sure they are following and they will enjoy the story and ask for it to be retold.

To help keep it interesting we should be open to sensing when the family is really into singing or just singing for family devotions. "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in you heart to the Lord. Giving thanks always for all thing unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 5:19,20). According to the scriptures a time of singing, praising and thanking God is an appropriate thing for family devotions. We can be creative and use various ways to help our family feel involved. When we find ways to involve each family member we will also help to keep their interest. We all know that if there is a project on which we do not feel needed or wanted we soon lose interest. Include each family member in selecting a song or a Bible passage and each family member from small children on up should learn to pray aloud with the whole family. This will help them when they become youth and adults.

In keeping family devotions interesting, we should look at the amount of time spent. Each family needs to decide what works best for them. If we insist on a long drawn out affair, we will likely lose our children's interest and it probably will not happen as often as it should. I don't know if this is a good way or not but I get a feel for how alert each one is feeling. If everyone is healthy and inspired by the singing and Bible reading we sometimes spend a longer time, but if everyone is tired and can hardly keep their eyes open sometimes it is only a few songs. Again, each family needs to decide what works best for them.

5. **Repetition is a good teacher.** This is true for all of us but especially children. sometimes we

tire of the favorite song or Bible story but that is how children learn and memorize. Deut. 6:6-7 speaks to that "And these words which I command thee this day shall be in thine heart. And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house and when thou walkest by the way and when thou liest down and when thou risest up."
An effective teacher must first carry a need in his own heart. We need to be teaching the commandments of God and the way of truth in everything. It should simply come out of us as we teach it again and again.

We must understand how much we need to depend upon God for wisdom and direction. (James 1:5-6) "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap if we faint not" (Gal. 6:9).

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