



Kitchen Table Devotions is a thoughtful but simple way for parents to creatively teach their children about the Lord. Each devotion follows the letters of the alphabet so children of all ages can engage. Parents will learn practical guidance for how to make this special time part of your family's consistent rhythm of life.

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From Wednesdays to Capital Letter Wednesdays

DURING A CERTAIN TIME in our lives we had “guest evenings” on Wednesdays, and we didn’t even imagine what it would grow to become in the near future. One night we were expecting our friends to come, and before the meeting we discussed a few details over the phone. “We are really looking forward to seeing you!”

“What should we bring?”

“Bring something for tea, and we’ll take care of the rest. We’re looking forward to seeing you,” I repeated, ending the conversation.

Those guest evenings were always a special time for our family. They were filled with fellowship with other families and opportunities to share our experiences, and they were often concluded with a prayer for one another. We valued these meetings very much, and therefore had them regularly. Having one night a week set aside for guests was helpful for planning other activities during the week. And it was a defining factor in creating another even more important evening activity in our life than the guest evening was.

During one of the meetings, our pastor gave me the book *Visionary Parenting* by Rob Rienow. The author addressed it to fathers, and in it he dealt a lot with

a family worship time. Out of everything I read in the book, one paragraph impressed me specifically. The author discussed how his family gathered together once a week at the table and sang. He also mentioned having a Bible study in the family circle. I don't know why, but my whole being just clung to that vision. Perhaps it was because during that time I felt a deficit of such a time in my own family. We had a guest evening every Wednesday, but we didn't have a regular time for spiritual fellowship in the circle of our family. Our souls needed an all-capital-letters WEDNESDAY.

Several days had passed since I read that part of the book, but I couldn't shake off the mental picture of having our family at the table, singing together and experiencing God as closely as if He were sitting right there among us. I reread the paragraph again.

Having bookmarked the page, I started to look for a convenient occasion to share this inspiring picture with my wife, Tanya. Such an opportunity presented itself at supper.

"Sweetheart, I want to share something from the book I'm reading," I said, and read the paragraph out loud.

Then I completed the picture with my own "paint." I suggested how wonderful it could be if we had a special time for worshiping God as a family. And she bought that vision! Now we shared it together. The only small thing left to do was to tell our children. And when a good opportunity came, I tried to do it in a most solemn manner.

"My dear ones! Starting tonight we are going to have a special activity in our family. The Family Evening will be a time when we worship God, sing, pray, and study the Bible together as a family."

So the decision was made and, though our young daughter didn't fully understand what it was all about, she nodded in agreement. It was almost a week until the first night was scheduled. I started to cook up a step-by-step plan for the upcoming evening. How do we fill that time? First, it must include singing together. Immediately I recalled a few verses from the Bible that encourage us to express our worship in song:

Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.

—EPHESIANS 5:18-19

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

—COLOSSIANS 3:16

But there was a tiny problem: I couldn't play the guitar, which would have been a perfect way to lead the family singing. What to do? Suddenly I had a thought to use Christian karaoke from the internet. My YouTube search for "Christian children's songs" brought up a whole bunch of familiar titles. There was the solution! I selected some songs and created a separate playlist with them. Then I spent some time preparing a topic for our discussion and thought about the way I was going to lead the concluding prayer at the table. For the next few days before the event I was playing the whole scenario in my head over and over again.

THE FIRST EVENING

The time for our first family evening had finally come. I remember how I was a bit nervous because I felt like I was going to lead a seminar for other families instead of spending time with my own. I had my laptop with the selected songs sitting on the table. We sang the first one, then the second, and then the third. The singing was quite lively!

"I want to sing one more!" exclaimed our daughter Anna.

"Maybe next time," I replied.

At that moment I was really committed to sticking to the plan I prepared. I was convinced that one step right or left would ruin the whole thing. It took

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months before I learned to be free and joyful in the way I lead our family evenings. After singing, I read a Bible passage and we discussed it together. The passage was taken from the book of Proverbs, and it dealt with bad and good words. I asked questions to my daughter and my wife alike. We were having a good discussion.

“And what should we pray about now?” I asked my “home flock.”

The most charming eyes looked at me with intensity. The kids suggested a few items for prayer. We prayed. It was over. When we were going to bed, I asked my wife how she liked our evening time. She said she liked it. Her affirmation meant a lot to me; it meant that we were headed in the right direction.

The next Wednesday came. Again we sang a few songs from YouTube, but this time they were followed by a twenty-minute episode from a Christian puppet show called *Ella's Playground*. This show's episodes are quite dynamic in their content and are geared for children the same age as our daughter. No wonder she liked the video so much! When the episode was over, I opened a passage from the Bible and we read it together to reinforce what we learned from the video. Our family evening was closed with a prayer.

SALVATION FROM THE MONOTONY

In another week we gathered around the table again, and again we sang along with YouTube videos and studied a Bible story, and the evening was concluded with a prayer. After we had had a few such evenings, I started to feel that they were very much alike. We wanted a routine, but not a rut! The way this time was spent was becoming predictable, and the newness of our family evenings threatened to grow into a tradition with a long gray beard. Something inside me was prompting me to rethink the order of our family evenings while still keeping the essence of our common worship of God. But how do we do that in the context of our family? I was perplexed. But by the grace of God I didn't have to wait for the answer very long. My wife was the first one to start on it.

“You do feel that our family evenings for some reason are pretty much alike, don't you?”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that too,” I replied.

“I have a suggestion,” she said. “Why don’t we change the leader from time to time? We could take turns leading. One week you prepare your ‘church service,’ and the next week I take my turn in leading the evening.” She was right, I did lead these evenings like church services! She continued. “We could cook something together. Our daughter might be in charge for the third week. Let her suggest ideas for our worship time, and let her take a turn leading it.”

My wife’s words were a huge inspiration for me. This was the remedy for the monotony!

“I like your suggestion,” I said. “By rotating the leaders, we can keep the freshness of our family evenings.”

Monotony immunity was developed, but there was another issue that kept me in unrest. “Cook something together . . . cook something together . . .” This phrase played over and over in my head, but the voice of tradition was whispering inside me. “Her idea is fine, but it is sort of unspiritual. How can we have a time of spiritual fellowship while cooking something together? It won’t be a church service, that’s for sure . . .” Until that moment, the ideas of “food” and “worshiping God” had been kept on different shelves in my mind. Every time I tried to combine my thoughts about God and about food, the result was something like, “Don’t you dare mix what is sacred with what is profane!” That was the reason why my wife’s suggestion to spend a worship evening cooking something together caused me some stress. “Well, it’s already decided, so let it be. We’ll see how it goes,” I told myself, trying to be calm about it.

Maybe for you there’s still a huge gap between the words “food” and “worship,” and that gap needs to be dealt with in light of the Bible. We’ll talk in chapter 6 about blessing God and blessing our food.

COOK SOMETHING TOGETHER

It was time for the family evening that my wife had prepared. I felt it as I was approaching our home. Our kitchen’s ventilation grill exits right next to the front door. Oh, what an inviting aroma! The whole evening was special as well.

We were making pizza: the crusts were prebaked, and ingredients for the filling were sliced up, so each one of us could make whatever pizza we liked. The fun of cooking was followed by joyful fellowship at the table. For the first twenty minutes, I entertained the thought of a short sermon that could be delivered at a convenient moment. Now I realize that it would not have made the whole thing any more “spiritual.” I was going to learn practically the principle described in the letter to the Corinthians: “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31 NLT).

I already knew how to go to church, pray, or lead a home worship gathering “for the glory of God,” but I didn’t know how to eat for the same cause! It took time before I was able to learn this by the mercy of God. Now when we sit at the dining table and hold hands, I usually say, “Blessed are You, our Lord, who sent us this food. We worship You, our caring Father. Amen.”

When we sit at the table and gobble up flavorful food, we experience a special time together. Food and worshiping God are no longer kept on “different shelves” in my mind. Now everything has its place, just as it was originally designed by the Lord. This is just wonderful: to sit like that as a family in the presence of the holy God and with grateful hearts partake of what He has generously provided us. It was He, our Lord, who gave different tastes and smells and textures to fruits and vegetables. And here, at this table, we see the full cycle of the glory of God as we return it to Him!

It has been four years now, but I still like the way my wife leads our family evenings. A culinary approach is not the only one in her arsenal. We not only partake of the food “for the glory of God,” but we also do crafts from time to time when we make something with our hands. My wife and I are learning to understand the second part of the aforementioned principle from 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

That night we took a lot of joy in making pizza and in eating it up. While we were still at the table, I turned to Anna.

“Sweetheart, next Wednesday is your turn to prepare our family evening. Do you need any help?”

Her eyes lit up. She asked, “And I’ll be able to have it the way I want?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“So, you’ll be playing the games that I’ll have prepared?”

“Uh, of course,” I replied with much less enthusiasm.

As you understand, my stereotypes about worshiping God started to break when the ideas of “food” and “worship” ended up on the same shelf. Now it was time to place “games” there as well! I heard the voice of tradition starting up in me, but since we decided to take turns, so be it. Let her lead it, and if there are to be games, we’ll play them.

It was the right decision to warn my daughter about the need for advance preparation. She had a whole week ahead to get ready, and during that week she came to me a few times to share her ideas. We selected several games from a book called *Games for Youth Ministry*. The outline was finalized by Wednesday.

FAMILY EVENING THE CHILDREN’S WAY

It was time for the family evening where our daughter was the leader. She gathered us in the living room and said, “We’ll have relay races for starters.”

We readily accepted the challenge by throwing a ball into an empty toy basket. Whoever gets the ball into the basket the most times wins!

“And now we’ll have riddles!” she said. And we started to solve them one by one.

All in all, it was a new experience of a family evening for us, and we concluded it with a good movie. (You can visit PluggedIn.com for a Christian review of movies to see which ones are appropriate for your family.) Speaking of movies . . . a quality discussion about a film will multiply the benefits of watching it. Having a discussion after a film helps us bring up details that we might have skipped. This had been the case for us that time: we watched a film and afterward we discussed the things each of us liked. That evening, like all the previous family evenings, was closed with a unified prayer for one another. We have a red carpet in our room, and every single family evening—whether it was studying the Bible, watching a film, cooking together, or playing relay races—was finished with a prayer on that carpet. So it was that time too: I asked everyone to express their needs and pray.

DIVERSITY OF CLOSING PRAYERS

The closing prayer is a special element of our family worship evenings. We try to be creative about it each time.

- Sometimes we select one of God's attributes (for instance, the one we have been contemplating during the Bible study or while watching a film). Then we worship God while expressing our thoughts about that attribute in our prayer to Him.
- Sometimes I ask, "What do you feel especially grateful to God for this week?" As we recollect, we share how God has been active in our lives, and then we pray with thanksgiving.
- Other times I may ask, "What are your goals and needs for the coming week?" And we share our expectations and then bring them to God in our requests.
- Sometimes our prayer is done according to announcements, where each one of us expresses his or her needs, and as soon as one need is expressed, we decide who is going to pray for it. As it turns out, even when our boy Yegor was just five, he had needs that he wanted us to pray for. One of the parents may pray for them, and the children may pray for the parents' needs.

Prayer helps to develop solidarity in our family. My role as a husband and a pastor in my family is to help my family members strengthen their relationship with God. Children's participation in the family prayer is one way to achieve that. But we don't force our children to pray; rather, we offer them an opportunity to do so. By forcing I mean phrases like, "Now it's Anna's turn to pray," or "Yegor, you will pray." Usually we say, "Who would like to pray?" It is a subtle but very important point, as it implies their personal choice from the heart.

CHILDREN'S EVENING THE GROWN-UP WAY

It was our youngest son's turn to lead our family evening for the first time. The idea that he came up with was just brilliant.

"It's going to be my family evening, so all of us will go to McDonald's!" Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication! He decided not to burden himself with a long preparation. The answer had popped up in his head a week ago. And to him it was clear that Daddy should support his idea. To be frank, I liked the direction the whole thing was taking. And yet, I had to break another stereotype in my head: worshiping God with a Big Mac and Coke—it can't even be possible, can it? (Now, don't put this book aside! In subsequent chapters we will put on our "biblical glasses" and critically reconsider the experience.) A calm atmosphere at the dining table at home is one thing, but is it possible to have a spiritual time with the family in the lively and noisy atmosphere of a fast-food restaurant?

When we went to McDonald's, we gave our order and waited for a good spot to free up. It was crucial to find a quiet nook, as the purpose of our visit was more than just having a bite. We came here to worship God and spend our family evening in fellowship. The ambient noise didn't hinder us from holding hands and praising the Creator. "Blessed are You, our Lord, who sent us finances and an opportunity to eat here. Amen."

"Amen," echoed the rest of the family. Both the food and the fellowship were wonderful. Understanding the importance of keeping the thread of our conversation about God going in a noisy surrounding, I decided to talk about the design of our tongue. We remembered our five basic tastes—sweet, salty, sour, bitter, umami (savory)—and it was a wonderful ground to think about our marvelous Creator who came up with all these and to praise Him together.

Instruction is always the responsibility of the parents. The Bible is very clear on that. Deuteronomy 6 can confidently be called the Biblical Constitution of raising children:

"These words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk

of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

—DEUTERONOMY 6:6-7

The phrase rendered as “teach diligently” means in the original “to focus, to remind constantly.” Spiritual rearing is similar to having to repeatedly sharpen a pencil because it will lose its sharpness. For example, once children learn the biblical truth “Do not tell lies,” they need to be reminded over and over again for it to become a part of their character and their lives.

The Bible passage listed above contains a few other important commands for parents. Let us notice:

- There are places where we need to remind our children of God. “In your house”—this is a place where “all masks have slipped.” At home, we are who we really are. Parents’ lifestyles teach children much more efficiently than their words. “Walk by the way”—this is to say that instruction is equally important both at home and beyond, wherever we find ourselves and wherever we go about our business. The general meaning of these words is “remind them of God in any place.”
- There are certain times when children should be reminded of God. The words “when you lie down, and when you rise” literally mean “day and night.” The general meaning of these words is “remind them of God at any time.”

Instructing children should be done at any opportunity, and even a dinner in a noisy McDonald’s restaurant isn’t an exception to this command from God.

Our visit to McDonald’s was repeated a few more times, but it wasn’t the only thing in our son’s arsenal. One time he suggested going to feed pigeons. That idea seemed just wonderful! Prior to that, we had fed pigeons at one of the city’s central squares on several occasions. This time, as the times before, we went to a store and bought a few packets of sunflower seeds.

When they spotted the first seeds dropped on the asphalt, pigeons one by

one began to flock around the place where we fed them. Usually the whole process lasts as long as we have seeds, so we buy several big bags. Sometimes these birds come so close that they can literally peck from one's hands. I enjoy watching them surround my son. He is afraid to make even the slightest move, and he throws seeds to his feet in small batches.

More and more pigeons fly closer. In most cases they sit on roofs of multi-story buildings, but having noticed their cousins' active movements, they begin to flock together. Sometimes there can be more than fifty of them!

That day, while we were watching the pigeons, we got to talk about church planting. There is quite a similarity between feeding pigeons and planting a new church. I told my children that our Irpin Bible Church, too, once started as a small group of people. God's Word is spiritual food, and those souls "hungry for God" not only found food for themselves at IBC, but those individuals also began to invite their friends to church services. The church started to grow, and it has kept on growing even now. While standing on that square and feeding pigeons, we were talking about God, who builds His kingdom with born-again people. We were giving names to new pigeons that flew closer, and we watched their behavior.

"See how timid this one is!" Anna noticed, pointing to a pigeon that just flew up and gently pecked at the scattered seeds some distance away from the main cluster of birds.

"Daddy, look, this one has a sick foot," said Yegor, pointing to a dark pigeon that drew up his foot while pecking with caution.

"This is what may happen in a church, too. Sometimes there are wounded people who come, but through the fellowship and the Word of God, they receive support and healing from their wounds," I said, recalling a story of a guy I knew whose life God has radically transformed. When Sasha got into a Christian rehabilitation center, he had head trauma. Just like the pigeon with a drawn-up foot, Sasha was looking for help and support from Christians. After some time, his wound was healed, and he came to believe in Jesus Christ. When he returned to his village, Sasha went to the local school and admitted that it was he who had stolen computers from the IT classroom the summer before. He was willing to

work out their cost by doing the repairs that were planned for the summer, but the school headmaster told Sasha that he had forgiven him and was happy that Sasha's life had changed. "Stay firm on this way," he told Sasha.

While glancing at the wounded pigeon, the children pondered the story I told them. Together we rejoiced at the miracle of that transformed life.

Sometimes sparrows fly close to pigeons. They tend to stick together as a separate band. Pigeons are larger, and they dominate, leaving only crumbs to sparrows. That observation provided an opportunity for a discussion about new people in a church community. New people find it difficult to join a church where "locals" pay no attention to them.

When we ran out of seeds, the pigeons stayed near us for some time, and then they left our "community," one by one. When I noticed that, I remember telling my children, "When a church ceases to preach the living Word of God and care for people, people will leave that church sooner or later. This is why it is important to pay attention to people so that our love and care for them does not grow weak."

From time to time we go to the park to feed the pigeons. This not only inspires children to take care of God's creation, but also provides a good opportunity to talk about spiritual truths. What does God think about our conversations in which ordinary things acquire a spiritual dimension? I guess God likes it a lot. Even Jesus Christ Himself skillfully turned His observation of birds into lessons on the kingdom of God! And when His gaze fell upon the lilies, people around Him heard truths about God's care (see Matt. 6:26–29). I am convinced that even today the Holy Spirit still gives parents wisdom to enable them to use life situations in instructing their children in faith.

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