

# The Father and Family Worship

J.W. Alexander (1804-1859)

**THERE is no member of a household whose individual piety is of such importance to all the rest as the father or head.** And there is no one whose soul is so directly influenced by the exercise of domestic worship. Where the head of a family is lukewarm or worldly, he will send the chill through the whole house. And if any happy exception occur, and one and another surpass him in faithfulness, it will be in spite of his evil example. He, who ought by his instructions and life, to afford a perpetual incitement to his inferiors and his juniors, is made to feel in case of such delinquency, that they must look elsewhere for guidance, even if they do not weep in secret places over his neglects. Where the head of the family is a man of faith, of affection, and of zeal, consecrating all his works and life to Christ, it is very rare to find all his household otherwise-minded. Now one of the chief means of promoting such individual graces in the head is this: his daily exercise of devotion with the members. It is more to him, than to others. It is he who presides and directs in it, who selects and delivers the precious Word, and who leads the common supplication, confession, and praise. To him, it is equal to an additional act of personal devotion in the day; but it is more. It is an act of devotion, in which his affection and duty to his house are particularly brought before his mind; and in which he stands in the place and pleads the cause, of all that he holds dearest upon earth. No one need wonder then, that we place family-prayer among the most important means of reviving and maintaining the piety of him who conducts it.

Observation shows that families which have no household worship are at a low ebb in spiritual things; that families where it is performed in a cold, sluggish, negligent, or hurried way, are little affected by it and little affected by any means of grace; and that families where God is worshipped, every morning and evening, by all the inmates of the house in a solemn and affectionate service are blessed with increase of piety and happiness. Every individual is blessed. Each one receives a portion of the heavenly food.

Half the defects and transgressions of our days arise from want<sup>2</sup> of consideration.<sup>3</sup> Hence the unspeakable value of an exercise, which twice every day calls each member of the household at least to think of God. Even the most careless or impious<sup>4</sup> son, or servant, must now and then be forced to talk a little with conscience, and meditate a little on judgment, when the

grey-haired father, bowed before God, with trembling voice pours out strong supplication and prayer. How much more mighty must be the influence on that larger number, who in ten thousand Christian families in the land are more or less impressed with the importance of divine things! And how peculiar and tender and forming must the same influence be, on those of the domestic group, who worship God in the spirit, and who often wipe the gushing tear, as they rise from their knees, and look around on husband, father, mother, brother, sister, child—all remembered in the same devotion, all clouded with the same incense of intercession!

Perhaps among our readers, more than one can say: “Times without number have I felt the influence of domestic worship on my own soul. When yet a child, no one means of grace, public or private, so awakened my attention, as when the children were prayed for day by day. In wayward youth, I was never so stung by conviction of my sin, as when my honored father earnestly besought God for our salvation. When at length in infinite mercy I first began to open the ear to instruction, no prayer so reached my heart, or so expressed my deep affections, as those which were uttered by my honored father. ”

**The maintenance of domestic religion in every house is primarily entrusted to the head of the family, whoever this may be.** If he is totally unfitted for the charge by an unbelieving mind or an ungodly life, the consideration is one which should startle and appall him; and it is affectionately submitted to any reader whose conscience may plead guilty to such an imputation. There are instances, where divine grace has so endowed some one of the household, even though not the parent or the senior, as plainly to devolve<sup>5</sup> on him the performance of this duty. The widowed mother, or the elder sister, or the actual guardian, may stand in the parent's place. But inasmuch as in a majority of cases, the service if rendered at all must be rendered by the father, we shall treat the subject under this supposition, premising that the principles laid down apply in most of their extent to all the other influences.

**No man can approach the duty of leading his household in an act of devotion without solemn reflection on the place which he occupies in regard to them.** He is their head. He is such by a divine and unalterable constitution. These are duties and prerogatives which he cannot alienate. There is something more than mere precedence in age, knowledge, or substance. He is the father and the master. No act of his and nothing in his

character can fail to leave a mark on those around him. This he will be apt to feel when he calls them about him to pray to God. And the more devoutly he addresses himself to the work, the more will he feel it. Though all priesthood, in the proper sense, is now done away on earth and absorbed in the functions of the great High Priest, there is still something like a priestly intervention in the service of the Christian patriarch. He is now about to go before the little flock in the oblation of a spiritual sacrifice of prayer and adoration. Thus it is said respecting Christ: "By him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually; that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name" (Heb 13:15). This perpetual offering, the head of the family is about to make. Until long perseverance in a deadening formality of routine shall have blunted all sensibility, he must yield to the solemn impression. It will sometimes lie like a burden at his heart; it will sometimes swell within his affections, like "wine which hath no vent" (Job 32:19). These are salutary and elevating emotions, which go to form the grave and lofty character which may be observed in the old peasantry of Scotland.

Though he be but a poor and unlettered man, who bows his hoary head amidst a band of sons and daughters, yet is he more sublimely honored than prayerless kings. His head is encircled with that "crown of glory," which is found "in the way of righteousness" (Pro 16:31). The father, who year after year presides in the sacred domestic assembly, submits himself to an influence which is incalculably strong on his own parental character.

**Where is a parent so likely to admit the impression of his responsibility, as where he gathers his household for worship?** It is true at all times that he is bound to watch for their souls; but now he is placed where he must feel it to be true. His family are met in a religious capacity and looking up to him for guidance. His eye cannot light on a single member of the group who is not committed to his especial charge. *Among all these there is not one for whom he shall not give account at the judgment-seat of Christ.* The wife of his youth! To whom shall she look for spiritual watch, if not to him? And how unnatural the family-relation, when this guardianship is repudiated and this relation reversed! The children! If ever saved, it will probably be in some degree consequent on his exertions. Domestics, and apprentices, and sojourners, are all committed for a term longer or shorter to his care. The domestic minister will surely cry, "Who is sufficient for these things?" and most of all when in the very performance of these duties. If his conscience is kept awake by personal acquaintance with God, he will never enter upon family-worship without sentiments which involve this very accountability;

and such sentiments cannot but have their impression on the parental character.

Unspeakable good would ensue, if every father could feel himself to be the earthly but divinely-appointed head-spring of religious influence to his household. Is it not true? And is there any means of making him feel it to be true, which can be compared to the institution of Family-Worship? Now he has assumed his rightful place as an instructor, a guide, and an exemplar<sup>6</sup> in devotion. Now his mouth, even though he be a silent or a bashful man, is opened.

**The hour of domestic prayer and praise is also the hour of Scriptural instruction.** The father has opened God's word in the presence of his little flock. He thus admits himself to be its teacher and under-shepherd. Perhaps he is but a plain man, living by his labor, unused to schools or libraries, and like Moses, “slow of speech, and of a slow tongue” (Exo 4:10). Nevertheless, he stands by the open well of wisdom, and like the same Moses, may draw water enough and water the flock (Exo 2:19). For the time, he sits “in Moses' seat,” and no longer “occupieth the room of the unlearned” (1Co 14:16). This is encouraging and ennobling.<sup>7</sup> As the loving mother rejoices to be the fountain of nourishment to the babe which clings to her warm bosom, so the Christian father delights to convey, even by reverent reading, “the sincere milk of the word” (1Pe 2:2). He has found it good to his own soul; he rejoices in an appointed means of conveying it to his offspring. The humblest master of a house may well feel himself exalted by recognizing such a relation to those who are under his care.

**The example of a father is acknowledged to be all-important.** The stream must not be expected to rise higher than the fountain. The Christian householder will feel himself constrained to say, “I am leading my family in solemn addresses to God—what manner of man should I be! How wise, holy, and exemplary!” This undoubtedly has been in cases innumerable, the direct operation of Family-Worship on the father. As we know that worldly men and inconsistent professors are deterred from performing this duty by the consciousness of a discrepancy between their life and any acts of devotion, so humble Christians are led by the same comparison to be more circumspect and to order their ways in such a manner as may edify their dependants. *There cannot be too many motives to a holy life, nor too many safeguards to parental example.* Establish the worship of God in any house,

and you erect around it a new barrier against the irruption<sup>8</sup> of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

**The master of the house in Family-Worship appears as the intercessor for his house-hold.** The great Intercessor is indeed above, but “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks” (1Ti 2:10) are to be made below; and by whom, if not by the father for his family? The thought of this must bring solemn reflections. The parent, who with any sincerity, comes daily to implore blessings on his wife, children, and domestics, will bethink<sup>9</sup> himself as to what they need. Here will be an urgent motive to inquire into their wants, temptations, weaknesses, errors, and transgressions. The eye of a genuine father will be quick; his heart will be sensitive on these points; and the hour of devotion will gather these solitudes together. From such a motive, as we have already seen, holy Job, after the festivities of his children, “sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings, according to the number of them all; for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually” (Job 1:5). Whatever may have been the effect on the sons, the effect on Job himself was, no doubt, an awakening of mind as to his parental responsibility. And such is the effect of Family-Worship on the head of a household.

The father of a family is under a wholesome influence, when he is brought every day to take a post of observation, and say to his own heart, “By this single means, in addition to all others, I am exerting some definite influence, good or bad, upon all who surround me. I cannot omit this service needlessly; perhaps I cannot omit it at all without detriment to my house. I cannot read the Word, I cannot sing, I cannot pray, without leaving some trace on the tender mind. How solemnly, how affectionately, how believingly, should I then approach this ordinance! With how much godly fear and preparation! My conduct in this worship may save or may kill. Here is my great channel for reaching the case of those who are submitted to my charge.” These are wholesome thoughts, naturally engendered by a daily ordinance which too many regard as little better than a form.

**The Christian *husband* needs to be reminded of his obligations; he cannot be reminded of them too often.** The respect, the forbearance, the love, which the Scriptures enjoin towards the feebler and more dependent party in the conjugal<sup>10</sup> alliance, and which are the crown and glory of Christian wedlock, are never more brought into action, than when they who

have plighted<sup>11</sup> their faith to one another years ago are brought day by day to the place of prayer and lift up a united heart at the feet of infinite mercy. As the Head of every man is Christ, so the head of the woman is the man (1Co 11:3). His post is responsible, and that in spirituals. He can seldom feel it more sensibly than when he falls down with the partner of his burdens at the throne of grace.

From *Thoughts on Family Worship*, reprinted by Soli Deo Gloria.

- 1 incitement – stirring up of feelings.
- 2 want – lack; absence of.
- 3 consideration – mature thought; serious deliberation.
- 4 impious – not showing due respect for God.
- 5 devolve – to pass on or delegate to another.
- 6 exemplar – one that is worthy of imitation.
- 7 ennobling – to make someone more noble or dignified.
- 8 irruption – breaking or bursting in.
- 9 bethink – cause oneself to reflect or consider.
- 10 conjugal – marital.
- 11 plighted – pledged; betrothed.

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