

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF "THE WAY"

Ten Ideas for Family Devotions

by Tim Challies

Read the Narratives. Read through the big picture of the Bible by focusing on the narrative (story) parts. In the Old Testament, read Genesis, parts of Exodus (you might skip the building of the tabernacle, for example, and the giving of the ceremonial law), parts of Joshua (perhaps skipping the division of the land), Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, Esther, and so on. For the New Testament, focus on a couple of gospels and Acts. Read the passages aloud, one section or one chapter at a time. Ensure that each day you read enough for it to be significant but not so much that you lose the attention of the children. Over the course of a year you should be able to make your way through much of the Bible's big story.

Read *Big Beliefs!* David Helm's *Big Beliefs!* is one of my favorite books of 2016 and my family has been using it each morning, 5 days a week, since it released. It includes a daily reading plus a short devotional and a couple of optional discussion questions. It's targeted at ages 8-12, but younger kids will be able to stretch up for it while older kids will be able to stoop down. It is framed around the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and teaches a broad systematic theology. We love it!

Read Around the Table. Sometimes it's best for mom and dad to do the reading from their own Bible, and especially so when children are young. But as children get older and more adept at reading, it may be best to get each child a Bible so they can follow along. When you do this, you can have each person take a turn reading aloud. It may be too clunky to read one verse per person, but perhaps each person can read a few verses at a time. Or perhaps you can have one person read each day's entire passage. This gets children comfortable with reading (and perhaps praying) in front of others while also pushing for deeper engagement with the text.

Read *Long Story Short*. Marty Machowski has released two excellent books that are ideal for family devotions: *Long Story Short* and *Old Story New*. *Long Story Short* is a family devotional program designed to explain God's plan of salvation through the Old Testament and is suitable for children from preschool through high school. *Old Story New* is the sequel and walks children through the great truths of the Christian faith in the New Testament. Both include daily readings, discussion points, and prayer suggestions, and are designed to be completed in about 10 minutes per day. (You might also consider his book *Wise Up* which focuses on Proverbs.)

Just Read the Bible. This is the simplest suggestion of all: Just read the Bible a book at a time. Younger children tend to do best reading narratives, but as children grow older they need the whole Bible. Consider reading the epistles slowly, a few verses per day, taking time to discuss and apply them. Or read all or some of the Psalms, or whatever else seems interesting and applicable.

Focus on Proverbs. The proverbs contain timeless wisdom and are written specifically for young people. Young Christians need the proverbs! Proverbs are meant to be treated like a lozenge or hard candy, to be savored over time rather than quickly chewed up. Consider reading the proverbs slowly over the course of weeks or months. Read 5 or 6 each day, but pause on 1 or 2 of them, considering what they mean and how they can be practically applied. It's unlikely you will ever read 5 or 6 without encountering at least 1 that is especially fitting for your family.

Read *One Year of Dinner Table Devotions and Discussion Starters*. Nancy Guthrie's *One Year of Dinner Table Devotions and Discussion Starters* is part of the One Year collection of resources and

is meant to be read around the dinner table, though I'm sure the breakfast table will work equally well. As the meal comes to a close, family members can take turns turning to the dinner-table devotion for that day, designed to be done together as a family in 10 to 15 minutes. The result, says the publisher, "is a meaningful daily discussion in which every family member can participate, drawing the whole family closer to God ... and each other."

Read a Catechism. The majority of today's Christians have forgotten about catechisms, but as believers we have quite a legacy with The Shorter Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, and others like them. The Gospel Coalition has combined the best of those two (while making them a bit more Baptist-friendly) with the New City Catechism. Catechisms approach the Christian faith in a question and answer format and invariably include Scripture to go along with them. If you structure your time around a catechism, do ensure you give attention to an associated Scripture passage.

Read *Morning and Evening*. Charles Spurgeon's *Morning and Evening* remains a devotional classic, and for good reason. Spurgeon's reflections are deep, timely, and suitable for quick reading. You may have the best success with the edition edited and modernized by Alistair Begg. You will need to put some effort into finding a suitable and significant reading to go with each since Spurgeon's devotions are typically based on a single verse.

Mix It Up. Consider deliberately mixing up your devotions for 2017. Perhaps spend a month reading a book of the Bible, then follow with a devotional book for a while. Maybe through the summer you can switch to the Proverbs, then head back to reading an epistle as you head into fall and the gospels as you approach the Christmas season. Variety is the spice of life, right? Variety will keep your children engaged and, equally important, keep their parents engaged.

Ten Tips for Family Devotions

Here are ten tips related to family devotions.

1. Less important than *how* you do family devotions is *that* you do family devotions.
2. Keep family devotions simple, especially when starting out. Five engaging minutes are far better than twenty rambling ones.
3. Family devotions is not only about gaining knowledge but also about establishing patterns and displaying priorities.
4. The foundation of family devotions is simple: read and pray. Better said: read, teach, and pray.
5. Family devotions don't need to be fun, but they must not be drab either. Focus on engagement, not entertainment.
6. The benefit of family devotions is not only gaining knowledge but also relating to God together as a family.
7. Do not grow discouraged if your children look bored. Measure long, not short and let your kids be kids.
8. Ask for tips on family devotions from others in your local church. Glean from their successes and false starts.
9. Expect that God will work through family devotions but do not demand that his work take a certain form.
10. Dad, take responsibility for family devotions. Lead your family by leading them to the Word and leading them in prayer.