

### **God-Saturated Homes - 3**

After believing the gospel at the age of 9, I spent 17 years in the same church in which I heard the gospel and was baptized. I went to its Sunday school. I went to its Friday night Bible club. I went to its youth group. At one stage, those more or less my age, must have numbered at least 20 or thirty. They sang the songs, all said they had accepted Jesus as Saviour, and sat through hours of sermons. One of them fell pregnant when she was 15. At least five fathered children out of wedlock, one of those five was actually one of the youth leaders at one stage. One of the girls went on to 'marry' another girl. Most all of them ended up living with someone out of wedlock.

You might be tempted to ask what was so appallingly wrong with the church I went to, and the answer is, nothing extraordinary. It was doing what most churches do with youth, and it had the same success rate. This is a global phenomenon – the majority of young people who attend church in their childhood and youth end up abandoning the faith altogether when they are in their twenties.

In this series, we have been trying to answer the question of why this happens again and again. We've suggested the answer is that many Christian homes have not obeyed Deuteronomy 6:4-9. That is, although they may profess to know God, God has not been the ultimate love of the home. God has not been the ultimate trust, the ultimate commitment, or the ultimate satisfaction. That kind of love for God has not been taught, either by direct instruction, or by observed actions. In other words, the homes have been practically secular. Though there is a creed in place, and there might be some prayer before meals, God is mostly absent from conversations, goals, priorities, plans, or activities. God is more like an invisible therapist for when you're down, an unseen motivational speaker for when you're aimless, and a concealed psychologist for when you're guilty. But He's not treated as if he is ultimate reality, whose existence explains everything we know. Children who grow up in these homes have a faith like a mere egg-shell, and it doesn't take much for it to be crushed altogether.

Children who grow up in homes where God is loved wholeheartedly, and where that love for God is communicated in various ways, will most often go on to make that faith their own, and teach it to their children. We've considered how we can teach ultimate love for God by direct instruction, and by observed action. As we consider Deuteronomy 6:7-9, we see a further two ways that we are to teach ultimate love for God: your routines, and your rituals.

#### **I. Your Routines Should Teach Ultimate Love for God**

*"You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.*

Here God tells Israel that their teaching and talking about loving God must take place when they sit in the house, and when they walk by the way, when they lie down and when they rise up. On one level, God is simply pointing out how this discipling relationship must take place formally and informally, indoors and outdoors. But in another way, God's words suggest the rhythm and routine of life. When you sit in the house is the time of day when you are at home; when you walk by the way is the time of day when you go out. When you lie down is the time of day when you sleep; when you rise up in the time of day when you wake from your sleep. Here is a suggestion of a cycle of events, of a routine, a rhythm of life – getting up in the morning, going out, coming back, lying down to sleep. Not only are you to teach about loving God routinely, but your routine itself communicates something. Your daily, and weekly, and monthly and even yearly routine teaches your family about ultimate dependence, ultimate devotion, ultimate love.

For the Israelite, his daily routine involved reciting the Shema in the morning and in the evening. When he ate his meals, his restricted diet reminded him to put a difference between the holy and the common. He thought of God. When he worked the land, there were laws regarding the animals, laws regarding sowing, tilling and reaping, which caused him to think on God. If he went to transact business, there were laws about money and equity. When he went home, there were laws about ritual cleanness. And if he was anywhere near the Tabernacle or later, the Temple, he would have seen a routine: a burnt offering twice daily, and a meal offering twice daily – one in the morning, and one in the evening, when the day's activity begins and when it ceases. There would be a sacrifice every Sabbath, and a sacrifice at the beginning of each month. There were sacrifices at the special feasts of Passover, Pentecost, Day of Atonement, Tabernacles. Every Sabbath was a rest day. He was to go to the Tabernacle or Temple three times a year.

What did this routine communicate to him? God is at the centre of life. God is the ultimate reality. God is the One we love ultimately, because He is ultimate reality. This is the opposite of secularism which tries to sideline God to the margins of life, relegating Him to a once-a-week appearance. Secularism has a daily routine in which God is invisible. Secularism has a routine which acts as if God does not matter.

A New Testament Christian does not have exactly the same situation as the Israelite. Jesus told us to abide in Him and he in us. The word *abide* just means to dwell, to live. We are to live in Him, live in His presence continually. When His words abide in us, and we are living before Him, and in light of Him, then our everyday routine will have Him as the ultimate reality behind all we do.

But he or she still has a daily routine, and that routine either has God present when you lie down and rise up, sit in the house or walk by the way, or it doesn't.

How does each day typically begin? Is there anything of God in it? One of the Jewish traditions was on Pentecost to bring the children in early in the morning, and put honey on their tongues just before reading the Scriptures. Does the day start with some kind of reading of the Word and prayer? Is there some equivalent of the morning sacrifice?

How does the day end? Is there anything of God in it? Are there perhaps some devotions, some thanksgiving prayers before bedtime, or some music played which honours God? Is there some equivalent of the evening sacrifice?

What kind of music routinely plays in the background? What sort of movies or TV programmes routinely play on the screen? Is the order of the day a home of distraction, or a home of reflection? When the days of rest come around, what is the routine there?

What is the habit around mealtimes, particularly dinnertime? Who is honoured for providing – which is, after all, why Dad was out all day – working hard so that God would be pleased to bless the home with provision. What is discussed at the table?

What are the weekly habits regarding when the church meets? What is the Saturday-night routine?

One of the keys to learning is repetition. What is repeated over and over again is learnt, memorized, internalised. The habits of your home, become a kind of rhythm that your children learn to get in step with. Whatever is regularly, consistently done says, this is important. This is necessary. This is essential.

The habits of your home, its rhythms, its routines display where the ultimate dependence, ultimate

devotion and ultimate delight are. However, verses 8-9 seem to show us a second way that we can teach ultimate love for God.

## II. Your Rituals Should Teach Ultimate Love for God

<sup>8</sup> *"You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.* <sup>9</sup> *"You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

It is possible that Moses wanted Israel to do something physical here, since people did not have a copy of the Law for themselves. But more than likely, God is saying, through Moses, that Israel must fill their homes with things that serve as signs and reminders of God as the ultimate reality. The Israelite home was to teach and instruct love for God not only by direct instruction, not only by observed action, not only by routine, but also by ritual.

We evangelical Christians hear the word *ritual*, and we get all kinds of negative reactions. Depending on your background, you might think of some Roman Catholic rituals or Orthodox rituals, or some ceremony performed without any understanding of the meaning behind it. And perhaps to you, ceremony has connotation of deadness, emptiness or even hypocrisy. I want you to understand that ceremony or ritual is not a negative or unChristian thing. It is something which is part of our lives, and something which needs to be used to teach ultimate love for God.

What is a ceremony or a ritual? It is an event which carries special meaning, performed on a special occasion. Weddings are rituals, ceremonies done on special occasions. All that we do at that ceremony has meaning – the way the bride and groom are dressed, what music is played, what is said, the rings. Funerals are rituals and ceremonies. The way we dress, what we sing, the order, how we treat the body of the deceased is all part of the meaning we convey. Birthdays are ceremonies. Graduations are ceremonies. Inauguration of presidents are ceremonies. Ceremonies are special occasions, filled with memorable symbols and acts which teach the importance and significance of what is being done.

If you read the book of Leviticus, you will find that the worship and service of God in the Tabernacle, and later in the Temple, contained elaborate ceremony. The Levites followed God's prescriptions for the various rituals of cleansing and sacrifice to the letter. As I've already mentioned, the Israelite's life was filled with laws, rituals and ceremonies, all of which were designed by God and prescribed by God. Here and there, God explained what the teaching purpose was of these rituals and ceremonies:

“That you may put a difference between the holy and the profane.”

**Leviticus 10:10** <sup>10</sup> *"that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean,*

God filled the life of Israel with ceremonies that helped the Israelite to see the difference between worship and selfishness; between living for God and living for self; between a life lived only for things under the sun, and a life lived with a perspective of things above the sun. To put it in modern language, God was rescuing the Israelite from practical atheism, from what we would call practical secularism. By clothing life in all kinds of symbols, the Israelite kept being reminded and taught that God was the ultimate reality.

God knew that ceremony and ritual are some of the most memorable teaching tools of all.

**Exodus 12:24-27** <sup>24</sup> *"And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance for you and your sons forever.* <sup>25</sup> *"It will come to pass when you come to the land which the LORD will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service.* <sup>26</sup> *"And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this*

service?' <sup>27</sup> "that you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.' "

**Joshua 4:5-7** <sup>5</sup> and Joshua said to them: "Cross over before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and each one of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, <sup>6</sup> "that this may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' <sup>7</sup> "Then you shall answer them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever."

Notice that the ceremony provoked a question from the child. That's the idea. Any well-planned ceremony has all kinds of symbols and procedures and manners which have meaning. It's the joy of children to observe and wonder, and the joy of parents to explain.

But perhaps someone says, "All that ritual belonged to the Old Testament. The New Testament is free of ceremony and from and that kind of thing." Not true. What is baptism, but a ceremony, a ritual, in which we use a symbol to convey a deep, transcendent meaning? What is the Lord's Supper except a ritual, a ceremony in which we use various symbols to convey special meaning? In fact, every Sunday worship service is a ceremony, in which we read the Scriptures, pray the Scriptures, sing the Scriptures and preach the Scriptures.

God is not against ceremony or ritual, He is against ceremony and ritual without meaning, without heart. He is against ceremony which is unbiblical or promotes a false gospel.

I'm afraid too many Christians have taken in a kind of Gnosticism without knowing it. Gnosticism was a false teaching present in the early centuries of the church. One of the things that Gnosticism taught was that the body is evil and the spirit is good. Consequently, anything to do with the body, such as eating, drinking, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching is seen as unspiritual and carnal or inferior, and the really spiritual focus on things like prayer and inner meditation.

But that is completely unbiblical. When God wants to remind us of the death of Jesus Christ, what does He have us do? We remember the Lord's death by eating and drinking – a ceremony that involves very physical, tangible elements. When we want to show that we are disciples of Christ, what do we do? We are immersed in water, a physical, tangible ceremony that depicts the truth. When we come together to worship, he tells us to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, and that very audible music rings in our ears as we do so. God is not against the use of food, clothing, colour, music to teach and to instruct.

God knows how we are made, and knows that ceremony or ritual is powerful, it is memorable. They emphasize importance and value. When it is explained, it teaches and instructs and shapes the heart in powerful ways. He wanted his people to have in their lives enough signs, enough things which pointed to ultimate truths.

So then the application comes to us: what kind of rituals or ceremonies are in our families that continually communicate ultimate love for God?

First of all, there is the weekly gathering with God's people, which families attend. In the Old testament, the Bible makes a point of saying that when Israel gathered before the Lord:

*" Now all Judah, with their little ones, their wives, and their children, stood before the LORD."*

Corporate worship is a ceremony and ritual that the family should prepare for and look to and

honour. We spoke last week about how our attitude towards Sunday worship communicates what we are devoted to and what we delight in. But beyond that, the time of worship itself communicates all kinds of truths about God. Once again, there may be many things in the worship service which the children wonder at. But that is an opportunity for parents to explain later.

The ceremony is not elaborate – there is no incense and special garments. It is reading the Word, singing the Word, praying the Word and preaching the Word. However, that simple worship ought to be regarded very highly. We want that time to be so special in our lives that it enables our children to distinguish between the holy and the common. They recognise God is holy, majestic and to be loved ultimately.

Let's say I didn't believe that. Let's say I wanted to communicate to my child that Sunday worship was ordinary; that Sunday worship was commonplace; that there was nothing transcendent or majestic happening. How might I communicate that to my child? If I wanted him to think that Sunday worship was no different to Monday or Thursday or Friday, then one way would be to dress him like any other day. If the ceremony of Sunday worship is as ordinary as any other day, then make sure the child feels that way and make sure you dress that same way. But if you wanted him to think that the Lord's Day is unique, and that worship is something sacred, and not common, you would use the very physical, tangible thing called clothing to help communicate that message. ("God looks at the heart!" yes, but we're not Gnostics. The physical affects the spiritual. If you want your child to feel that the event is casual, then you dress him that way.")

When we are about to worship, we help our children to understand, we're going to do something important, and joyful and serious. That means we have to sit quietly. That's what we would tell them if we were in the Supreme Court, or if we were at a funeral, or at a military memorial.

What about what we do before worship? If we want to communicate how special this day is, we begin preparing beforehand. We get things ready on Saturday night, because not only do we want to avoid the tension that comes from rushing on Sunday morning, but we want to communicate, tomorrow is the Lord's Day. We get ready in advance.

If you drive to church as a family, have you ever thought of singing as you travel? The Israelites would sing Psalms 120-135, the Psalms of Ascent, as they travelled up to Jerusalem for the feasts. After worship, we can use the Sunday dinner table to discuss what we saw in the Word of God. Dad's, use the Pastor's Parrots, ask questions. You see, if after church is over, all that happens is the TV goes on, or the PlayStation comes out, the message is... well, we got that out of the way. But if we talk of the Word, we communicate, we have just worshipped God with His people, and it has affected us. He is our ultimate devotion.

A second ceremony we need to build into our lives is family worship. Family worship does not need to be elaborate, it just needs to be meaningful. A time ideally daily, but realistically several times a week when the whole family gathers, and the father leads by reading the Word, explaining it, helping the family to understand it and apply it, and then to pray it – respond to God in prayer, and even in song. A good idea is to link this with one ritual or ceremony we should all have which is the dinner table. The table in Scripture is the place of fellowship, the place of honouring those you love, the place of sacrifice and service, the place of instruction. The dinner table ought to be a ceremony we have every day. We open it with prayer. We eat together. Isn't it interesting how often God instructs us and teaches us love for Him over a meal? Revelation 3:20.

We speak to each other of the day, of its blessings, of its challenges, of its lessons. We laugh together, learn together and enjoy each other. The table is a great place for the father, if he's present,

to open the Bible, read, lead in prayer. It's a great place for children to recite Scripture memory verses, or catechism questions, or to learn hymns together. When the dinner table is an event which is beautiful and memorable, it is one of the strongest rituals that will instil the love of God into your family's heart.

But what is fast replacing the dinner table is the TV tray and the coffee table. The television is the only one speaking at meal times, while everyone silently munches away, glaring at the box. No one speaks to each other, encourages each other, loves each other. Instead, everyone just drifts from one another. Fathers, reclaim the dinner table; reclaim family worship. They will be ceremonies that will inscribe love for God on your children's hearts. They will forget most of the TV shows they watch. They will forget many of the games they play. But they will remember the ceremony of the dinner table and family worship.

A third kind of ceremony, or ritual, or tradition are those you build around significant Christian holidays. Yes, the Christian is not commanded to celebrate Christmas or Good Friday or Ascension Day, but what opportunities the Christian holidays do present. Part of the reason it is so difficult to reach the Jews is that the ceremonies of Passover and Shavuot and Yom Kippur and Sukkot and Chanukkah and Purim are so memorable and so imprinted on the mind from the earliest age. Those ceremonies and celebrations are stirring, memorable, beautiful and furnish the mind and imagination of the young Jewish child.

Let me encourage you, even if you do not celebrate Christian holidays, use those days as opportunities to build your own traditions that will teach the truths of those days. Remember, God has given you the pattern in Scripture – we are physical and spiritual beings. We respond to taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing. What can you do that will honour our Saviour's resurrection, and mark that day with significance? On Christmas, what do you do that celebrates the Incarnation of Jesus Christ? What do your ceremonies at home on Good Friday, and Resurrection Sunday communicate? Just another day? A day for more food? A day for self-indulgence? A day to see extended family? Or can you build real meaning into these days so that loving God is again on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

A fourth kind of ceremony would be ones you develop as a family to mark special days or events. you can develop your own that illustrate or teach God as the ultimate reality. Birthdays. Ceremonies for adolescence, for graduation, for pledges of purity. There are many opportunities to turn events and situations into special occasions with great truths about God taught.

Don't be one of those Christians who dismisses the whole idea of ceremony. If God built ritual and ceremony into Old Testament Israel, if he continued it with us in baptism and the Lord's Supper, we need family rituals and ceremonies which inscribe the love of God on the doorposts and gates of our homes. We need these signs, these symbols which teach truth memorably, powerfully, unforgettably. The difficulty is that it takes work. It takes work to have a worship service with beauty and unity and meaning. It takes work to have family devotions that are meaningful and regular. It takes work to plan dinners and dinner-time conversation. It takes work to plan traditions and activities associated with biblical events. Ceremonies are costly, when they're done well. But that's exactly why God values them, and wants us to have such signs on our hand.

In that youth group of 30, what would have happened if the daily routine in those homes had suggested – begin with God, and end with God? Stop and thank God. Inconvenience yourself to worship Him when His people gather. Where would they be today if there parents had filled their lives with living object lessons in the form of ceremonies – corporate worship, family worship,

special days, special events? I cannot say for sure, but I suspect it would look different.

Where will our 40 young people be when they are 15, 18 or 25? We must begin now, filling their lives with routines and rituals that teach ultimate love for God.