THE

**WORKS**

OF

**THE REV . JOHN NEWTON**

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF

ST. MARY WOOLNOTH AND ST. MARY WOOLCHURCH-HAW,

LOMBARD STREET, LONDON.

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CONTAINING

AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA, DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,

SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,

A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,

MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED

MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME.

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LETTER IV.

TO THERON, ON FAMILY-WORSHIP.

SIR,

A NEGLECT of family-prayer is, I am afraid, too common amongst professors in this day. I am glad that you consider it both as a duty and a privilege, and are by grace determined, that when you shall commence master of a family, you will worship God with all your house. It was Abraham’s commendation, that he not only served the Lord himself, but was solicitous that his children and household might serve him likewise. I trust that he who inclines your heart to walk in the foot­steps of faithful Abraham will bless you in the attempt, and give you peace in your dwel­ling; a mercy which is seldom enjoyed, which, indeed, can hardly be expected, by those families which call not upon the Lord.

Though I readily comply with your request, and should be glad if I can offer anything that may assist or animate you in your good purpose; I am afraid I shall not answer your expectations with regard to the particulars of your inquiry, concerning the most proper method of conducting family-worship. The cir­cumstances of families are so various, that no determinate rules can be laid down, nor has the word of God prescribed any; because, being of universal obligation, it is wisely and graciously accommodated to suit the different situations of his people. You must, there­fore, as to circumstantials, judge for yourself. You will do well to pursue such a method as you shall find most convenient to yourself and family, without scrupulously binding yourself, when the scripture has left you free.

We have no positive precept enjoining us any set time for prayer, nor even how often we should pray, either in public or private; though the expressions of, “continuing in­stant in prayer,” “praying without ceasing,” and the like, plainly intimate that prayer should be frequent. Daniel prayed three times a-day; which the Psalmist speaks of as his practice likewise; and in one place de­clares his purpose of praising God seven times a-day. This last expression is perhaps, inde­finite, not precisely seven times, but very often. Indeed, a person who lives in the exercise of faith and love, and who finds, by experience, that it is good for him to draw nigh to God, will not want to be told how often he must pray, any more than how often he must converse with an earthly friend. Those whom we love, we love to be much with. Love is the best casuist, and either re­solves or prevents a thousand scruples and questions, which may perplex those who only serve God from principles of constraint and fear. And a believer will account those his happiest days, when he has most leisure, and most liberty of spirit, for the exercise of prayer. However, I think family-prayer can­not be said to be stated, unless it be performed at least daily, and, when unavoidable hindrances do not prevent, twice a-day. Though all times and seasons are alike to the Lord, and his ear is always open, whenever we have a heart to call upon him; yet to us there is a peculiar suitableness in beginning and closing the day with prayer: in the morning, to ac­knowledge his goodness in our preservation through the night, and entreat his presence and blessing on our persons and callings in the course of the day; and at night, to praise him for the mercies of the day past, to humble ourselves before him for what has been amiss, to wait on him for a renewed manifestation of his pardoning love, and to commit ourselves and our concerns to his care and protection while we sleep. You will of course choose those hours when you are least liable to be incommoded by the calls of business, and when the family can assemble with the most convenience; only I would observe, that it greatly preserves regularity and good order in a house, to keep constantly to the same hours when it is practicable; and likewise, that it is best not to defer evening-prayer till late, if it can be well avoided, lest some who join in the exercise, and perhaps the person himself who leads in it, should be too weary or sleepy to give a due attention. On this account, I should advise to have family-prayer before supper, where people have the choice and disposal of their own hours.

I think, with you, that it is very expedient and proper that reading a portion of the word of God should be ordinarily a part of our fa­mily-worship; so likewise, to sing a hymn or psalm, or part of one, at discretion, provided there are some persons in the family who have enough of a musical ear and voice to conduct the singing in a tolerable manner; otherwise, perhaps, it may be better omitted. If you read and sing, as well as pray, care should be taken that the combined services do not run into an inconvenient length.

The chief thing to be attended to is, that it may be a spiritual service; and the great evil to be dreaded and guarded against in the ex­ercise of every duty that returns frequently upon us, is formality. If a stated course of family-prayer is kept up as constantly in its season as the striking of the clock, it may come in time to be almost as mechanically perform­ed, unless we are continually looking to the Lord to keep our hearts alive. It most frequently happens, that one or more members of a family are unconverted persons. When there are such present a great regard should be had to them, and everything conducted with a view to their edification, that they may not be disgusted, or wearied, or tempted, to think that it is little more than the fashion or cus­tom of the house; which will probably be the case, unless the master of the family is lively and earnest in the performance of the duty, and likewise circumspect and consistent in every part of his behaviour at other times. By leading in the worship of God before children, servants, or strangers, a man gives bond, as it were, for his behaviour, and adds strength to every other motive which should engage him to abstain from all appearance of evil. It should be a constant check upon our language and tempers in the presence of our families, to consider that we began the day, and propose to end it with them in prayer. The Apostle Peter uses this argument to influence the conduct of husbands and wives towards each other; and it is equally applicable to all the members of a family; “That your prayers be not hin­dered:” that is, either prevented and cut off, or despoiled of all life and efficacy, by the fer­ment of sinful passions. On the other hand, the proper exercise of family-prayer, when re­commended by a suitable deportment, is a happy means of instructing children and ser­vants in the great truths of religion, of soften­ing their prejudices, and inspiring them with a temper of respect and affection, which will dispose them to cheerful obedience, and make them unwilling to grieve or offend. In this instance, as in every other, we may observe, that the Lord’s commands to his people are not arbitrary appointments, but that, so far as they are conscientiously complied with, they have an evident tendency and suitableness to promote our own advantage. He requires us to acknowledge him in our families, for our own sakes; not because he has need of our poor services, but because we have need of his bles­sing, and without the influence of his grace (which is promised to all who seek it) are sure to be unhappy in ourselves and in all our connections.

When husband and wife are happily par­takers of the same faith, it seems expedient, and for their mutual good, that besides their private devotions, and joining in family-prayer, they should pray together. They have many wants, mercies, and concerns, in common with each other, and distinct from the rest of the family. The manner in which they should improve a little time in this joint exercise can­not well be prescribed by a third person; yet I will venture to suggest one thing; and the rather, as I do not remember to have met with it in print. I conceive that it may prove much to their comfort to pray alternately, not only the husband with and for the wife, but the wife with and for the husband. The Spirit of God by the apostle, has expressly restrained women from the exercise of spiritual gifts in public, but I apprehend the practice I am speaking of can no way interfere with that re­striction. I suppose them in private together, and then I judge it to be equally right and pro­per for either of them to pray with the other. Nor do I meet with anything in St, Paul’s writings to prevent my thinking, that if he had been a married man, he would, though an apostle, have been glad of the prayers of his wife. If you ask, how often they should pray togeth­er? I think the oftener the better, provided it does not break in upon their duties; once a-day at least; and if there is a choice of hours, it might be as well at some distance from their other seasons of worship. But I would ob­serve, as before, that in matters not expressly commanded, prudence and experience must direct.

I have written upon the supposition that you use extempore prayer; but as there are many heads of families who fear the Lord, and have not yet attained liberty to pray extempore before others, I would add, that their inability in this respect, whether real, or whether only pro­ceeding from fear, and an undue regard to self, will not justify them in the omission of family-prayer. Helps may be procured. Mr. Jenk’s Devotions are in many hands, and I doubt not but there are other excellent books of the same kind, with which I am not acquainted. If they begin with a form, not with a design to confine themselves always to one, but make it a part of their secret pleading at the throne of grace, that they may be favoured with the gift and spirit of prayer; and accustom themselves while they use a form, to intersperse some pe­titions of their own; there is little doubt but they will in time find a growth in liberty and ability, and at length lay their book entirely aside. For it being every believer’s duty to worship God in his family, his promise may be depended upon, to give them a sufficiency in all things, for those services which he re­quires of them.

Happy is that family where the worship of God is constantly and conscientiously maintained. Such houses are temples, in which the Lord dwells, and castles garrisoned by a divine power. I do not say, that, by honour­ing God in your house, you will wholly es­cape a share in the trials incident to the pre­sent uncertain state of things. A measure of such trials will be necessary for the exercise and manifestation of your graces, to give you a more convincing proof of the truth and sweet­ness of the promises made to a time of afflic­tion, to mortify the body of sin, and to wean you more effectually from the world. But this I will confidently say, that the Lord will both honour and comfort those who thus ho­nour him. Seasons will occur in which you shall know, and probably your neighbours shall be constrained to take notice, that he has not bid you seek him in vain. If you meet with troubles, they shall be accompanied by supports, and followed by deliverance; and you shall upon many occasions experience, that he is your protector, preserving you and yours from the evils by which you will see others suffering around you.

I have rather exceeded the limits I proposed, and therefore shall only add a request, that in your addresses at the throne of grace you will remember, &c.