

# Around the Table



Connecting  
with Your Family  
at Mealtimes

Sharon Fleming

**ECS**  
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*The Word to the World*

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*Around the Table: Connecting with Your Family at Mealtimes*

Sharon Fleming

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PO Box 1028

Dubuque, IA 52004-1028

phone: (563) 585-2070

email: [ecsorders@ecsministries.org](mailto:ecsorders@ecsministries.org)

website: [www.ecsministries.org](http://www.ecsministries.org)

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# Dedication



**This book is dedicated  
to Jim,  
my husband and life partner.  
Thank you for helping shape  
these important moments  
around the table  
with our family.**

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# The Chapter Before the First



*This will be written for the generation  
to come; that a people yet to be  
created may praise the LORD.*

—Psalm 102:18

It was the year 1859. Two brothers, Francis and James, decided to take their fiancées to an evangelistic revival meeting in their father's barn in County Down, Northern Ireland. That night both couples made decisions that have affected hundreds of people all over the world through all the intervening years: Francis and his fiancée rejected the gospel message they heard, and James and his fiancée, Jane, responded to it and became believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Both couples eventually married. In all my inquiries, I have not been able to find even one descendant of Francis who has come to Christ, even though cousins witnessed to them and shared the gospel clearly.

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THAT NIGHT BOTH  
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## Around the Table

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James and Jane had twelve children, of whom only six survived to adulthood. Though tuberculosis did not allow Jane to see all her children grow up, all became Christians. Apparently James and Jane liked the name “Samuel” because they gave the name to three sons! The first two died in infancy, but the third lived to be eighty-six.

Being adventuresome, Sam decided to immigrate to the United States, even though it meant he might never see his family again. He had been apprenticed as a hardware salesman in Ireland and found a job easily in the U.S. On Sundays he often preached in the Gospel Halls. After several years he took a leave of absence from work for six weeks to hold tent meetings with another evangelist. During these meetings several came to know the Lord as their Savior. Sam never returned to the hardware store but spent the rest of his life as a full-time, itinerate evangelist, preaching for the last time four days before he passed away.

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**HUNDREDS OF  
PEOPLE WERE SAVED  
UNDER SAM'S  
PREACHING.**

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He worked with other preachers in small towns in the Midwest of the United States and Canada. The meetings were held in large tents in open fields. The men would stay in a town for several weeks, as long as they believed the Spirit was at work, holding meetings six nights a week. During the day he visited the people in town to witness to them and invite them to the meetings. Hundreds of people were saved under his preaching during his lifetime, including a woman of French-Canadian descent, Elda Rose, who later became his wife.

Sam and Elda Rose had four children. Lila, the eldest, drowned in the Mississippi River when she was only twelve, but all four of them became believers. The youngest, Philip, married Kay when he was twenty-seven. He worked for IBM as a computer programmer, and she was a homemaker. He preached, counseled, and served as an elder in their local assembly while she taught Sunday school, and ran the Girls' Club. Together they welcomed many into their home.

Phil and Kay had three children, first a girl, then a boy (who lived only two days), and finally another boy. After their daughter married, she

and her husband, Jim, believed God was calling them to be missionaries in South America, and they served the Lord there from 1984 to 2008.

I am that daughter.

Up to my generation God has blessed the decision James and Jane made over 150 years ago with the salvation of all their descendants. Another great-granddaughter was a missionary doctor in Botswana for a time and is now working in Brazil. Others have been scattered to Germany, South Africa, Italy, England, Russia, and all over the United States.

I am a fourth generation Christian on my mother's side as well. My great-grandmother turned to Christ when her four children were already young adults, and God, in His boundless mercy, brought them all to a knowledge of salvation.

This heritage is a privilege for me. My parents brought my brother and me up according to biblical principles in every area of life. I am so grateful that I come from a home where the things of the Lord were given priority.

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**YOU CAN BEGIN  
THE HERITAGE THAT  
JAMES AND JANE  
BEGAN SO LONG AGO  
FOR ME.**

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Jim and I lived in Lima, Peru for eight years and were in Bogotá, Colombia from 1992-2008. Very few of the Christians I've known in South America have had the privilege of a spiritual heritage like I've had. Thank God that, all over the world, people are becoming the first ones in their family line to know the Lord. I always tell them that they can begin, for *their* children and grandchildren, the heritage that James and Jane began so long ago for me. Praise be to God! What a great privilege and responsibility of starting family habits and traditions that will teach spiritual truths.

Taking this responsibility seriously, some have asked me,

- “What is a Christian family like?”
- “What's the difference between a Christian family and a non-Christian family?”
- “What should we do to raise our children according to what God wants?”

## **Around the Table**

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What I share in these pages is just one aspect of the Christian family. It is the time of day when it's possible to experience the closeness of being a family: around the dinner (or even breakfast!) table. I'll tell you about what I've learned from having lived this in my childhood, what I have seen in other Christian homes, and what Jim and I try to practice with our four children. Of course, this isn't the sum total of what God wants for the family, but I see it as something extremely important and something that is lacking in so many modern, busy households—even among Christians.

The ideas I've written about aren't the only ones, and maybe they are not all applicable to your family. I share them to start you thinking about what ideas will work for *your* family in *your* situation. My hope and my prayer is that the experiences and traditions of our family and other's whose examples you'll find here will help you have better times together, to know each other, to help each other, and to build each other up.

### **Thank you!**

I want to express my thanks to all my friends who shared something of their lives and families with me. Without their creative ideas and variety of situations this book wouldn't be the help and blessing I pray it will be to many.



# The Family Meal



*When the hour had come, He reclined  
at the table, and the apostles with Him.  
And He said to them, "I have earnestly  
desired to eat this Passover with you . . ."*

—Luke 22:14-15

“**M**om! What’s for supper?”

For generations this question has echoed through homes even as the house is still reverberating from the front door slamming. The child asking wants to be sure that there is enough food, that his well being has been thought of, and that the family will be together again around the table. They want to know they are loved.

The table my family ate around when I was little was a rectangular, metal, drop-leaf table with a gray Formica top and black wrought-iron legs. The compactness was necessary when my parents bought it as newlyweds for their twenty-six foot single width mobile home. When just the two of them were eating they kept the ends down, but at least once a week they extended it to full size to include others around their table.

## Around the Table

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The family eventually grew to four: my parents, my younger brother, and me. My dad sat at the head and my mother at the other end to be able to serve the food easily. My brother and I sat on the two sides facing each other. When our legs grew long enough, we held foot wars under the table until my parents came up with a solution: everyone rotated one seat to the left so that my brother was at the head and I was at the foot. That way we couldn't reach to kick each other, and meal times were more tranquil. Today, that's one of the things my brother and I laugh about when we get together.

We didn't always eat around this table. There was a round table in the family room where we ate when Monday Night Football was on. I'm not a TV football fan, so I was the obvious one to sit with her back to the television.

We had a picnic table in the backyard, and in the summer we often ate supper out there. While the sun was slowly setting we would enjoy watching the birds flit over the bird bath and the neighbor's cat crouching and observing them. We would listen to the children playing next door, and sometimes envy the smell on the breeze of another neighbor's barbecue.

Sometimes, when my dad's work or my brother's soccer interfered with dinnertime, there were only three at the table, leaving the feeling that something was missing. Whether it was my brother's unfunny jokes or my dad's thoughtful ideas, something was needed to complete the family circle.

My brother and I took turns setting and clearing the table. I always thought setting was easier and sometimes would rush in to do it out of turn so that I wouldn't have to hang around to load the dishwasher, wipe the table, and help wash the pots and pans. But when I had to clear, Mom was always there, making sure things were put away in the right place and that the job was done right.

After dinner, but before we got up to do the dishes, we had our family Bible reading. When my brother and I were young we read Bible storybooks. When we got older we read a chapter from the Bible every night. I remember reading through the book of Proverbs for what seemed

like an eternity using a verse by verse commentary that helped to apply it to our lives. Sometimes sibling rivalry led to ridiculous arguments between my brother and me about who had gotten to read more verses.

I think my childhood would have been incomplete without these memories of happy times with my family around the table. Even the arguments and fights that my brother and I had now bring a smile to my face, although at the time I doubt my parents thought that those fights would make *good* memories.

Mealtimes around the table weren't only fun; they were times when we learned. We learned to share our lives, to converse, to listen, to take responsibilities, to resolve disagreements, to read the Bible, and to appreciate nature.

When my husband, Jim, and I eat together with our four children, Daniel, Rosana, Samuel and Christina, we're trying to put into practice the same things we learned as children. Sometimes it's not easy. Meals with kids aren't always idyllic. Dinner on this day I am writing was more typical than I'd like to admit: Rosana, age six, got off her chair many—too many—times; Christina demanded our undivided attention from her highchair; Samuel, five, ate so slowly that he lost out on dessert; Jim received an urgent phone call; and at the end the meal, Daniel blew out the candle with such force that wax flew all over the table. (Yes, I blew up over each incident, none of which were really that important!)

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WITHOUT  
PROMPTING,  
THE KIDS SAID,  
"THANKS, MOM!"

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But when I think about this evening's dinner, I realize that there were also enjoyable moments. We got a good laugh when Jim related to us how his brother could annoy his sister at mealtimes when they were young by just tapping his fingers on the table. Baby Christina said something that almost sounded like a word and then gave us her priceless smile. And after dinner, without prompting, the kids said, "Thanks, Mom! That was good." (I'm still basking in that one!) These are reasons why it's worth the effort of eating together with the family.

## **Distractions and Struggles**

I know many parents have to fight against society and schedules to be able to get the family around the table. It seems as though job schedules were designed with the destruction of the family in mind. Life in a city or suburb can be very complicated: long commutes and heavy traffic require some parents to leave before dawn to get to work on time. Then bosses try to squeeze out every ounce of energy so that when Dad (and maybe Mom too) get home, they're exhausted. "We can never eat together on weekdays," Miriam, a mother of three, commented to me. "My husband has too much work. It's because he's very responsible and won't let anyone else do his work. He never gets home before nine at night."

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**PARENTS HAVE  
TO FIGHT AGAINST  
SOCIETY AND  
SCHEDULES.**

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In my neighborhood there are many fathers that I wouldn't even recognize on the street because they're only home after dark. It's not just dads that work these schedules anymore, either. What's for dinner when Mom's wiped out as well?

Then there are the children's full days. Here in Bogotá, Colombia, many kids have to be on the school bus by 6 a.m. After school there are special classes, clubs, homework, sports, therapy, doctors' appointments—you name it. When a family finally overcomes all these distractions from the outside, and sits down together at the table, there are still more possible interruptions. Every family seems to have at least one person who thinks they cannot function without the television on. Then there's that very useful machine that allows you to talk to people who are miles away but somehow "knows" when a family is sitting down to enjoy a quiet meal together, and interrupts with its ringing.

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**MEALS AND TIMES  
WITH FAMILY ARE  
SOME OF THE BEST  
MEMORIES.**

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Even with all the obstacles, most of us manage to have happy family mealtimes at least once in a while, and long to do it more frequently. Most adults reminiscing about their childhood think of the meals and time with their family as some of their best memories. Think of your own childhood. I'm sure you have

some good memories of your own family mealtimes. Or if you had a difficult or dysfunctional life as a child, maybe that was something you envied about your more fortunate friends.

The family and the church are the two institutions that God set in motion, and the family was founded 4,000 years before the church came into being! It is the basis of every culture. You already know that our families are too important to let modern life destroy them. Even among non-Christians there is a push to have meals together as a family. How much more important is it for us who belong to two cultures—that of our country and Christianity? We are new creations, and all things should be new and changed.

Keep looking for the times when your family can be together around the table. Don't ever write it off as a luxury! Never allow yourself to call it "impossible." We must give priority to our families, and that

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**SET A GOAL OF  
EATING TOGETHER  
AT LEAST THREE  
TIMES A WEEK.**

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requires spending time together. "It's so important, because it lets us know, help, encourage, build up, warn, and discipline our children," Emilia, the mother of two college age kids, told me. "But it doesn't happen in a day. It is a question of time," she wisely added.

If your family doesn't currently eat together, set a goal of doing it at least three times a week, or whatever you think is realistic for you. If you can eat together only on weekends, that's fine. Start there. If you can eat together on weekdays too, all the better.

If you truly want to be together as a family around the table—even though it seems impossible—I encourage you to ask God to show you how to arrange your schedules and to give you creativity to find the time for this important family tradition. God can work in many ways. Ephesians 3:20 says, "[He] is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think."

When God shows you the way to bring your family together at mealtimes, I want to hear from you. Your success story can encourage others in moving toward this goal. You can write to me in care of the publisher, ECS Ministries.

## **The Priority**

Nowhere is it written that the meal the family eats together has to be *dinner*. In some families, breakfast is the family mealtime. “Even though someone has had to stay up late doing their homework and goes back to bed after breakfast,” one mother told me, “we are all together for breakfast.” The mother who told me they can’t be together as a family during the week added, “But we eat together on weekends without fail.” Of course, the more, the better, but the important thing is to begin somewhere.

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**IN SOME FAMILIES,  
BREAKFAST IS THE  
FAMILY MEALTIME.**

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If your spouse or another older member in the household does not want to make the effort, it will not help to scold or nag. Instead, when he arrives, serve him a hot meal with a smile. Sit down and enthusiastically tell him what happened when the rest of you were together around the table and recount the conversation he missed out on. This scenario accomplishes two things: first, it includes him in the family and its love, and second, it should make him want to do everything possible to change his schedule to not miss these happy times! And don’t forget the power of prayer to change his attitude and/or his schedule. As one friend told me, “With a little good seasoning and lots of love, Mom knows they will come.”

The important thing is that you are together, sharing good, nutritious food, interesting conversation, and an enjoyable time. If your family makes this time a priority, it *will* happen.