

The
FATHER-HEART

of God



MOST
Our Urgent Need!

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Our Most Urgent Need!

During a holiday period several years ago we were blessed to be given a week at a friend's cottage at the beach. Trying to unwind on the first few days of this time I stumbled over a couple of puzzles; both were scenic pictures of over 2,000 pieces each. I tackled the first with great resolve anticipating finishing the challenge rather quickly. Instead I struggled for two days! I just could not figure it out. With far-less resolve I had a go at the second and again struggled to make heads-or-tails of it. Just as I was about to throw in the towel – “Sigh... Whipped by a couple of puzzles!” – I realised my problem. Some prankster had switched the lids! I was trying to build a puzzle with the wrong picture in mind! With the right picture in mind, I finished the puzzles without a sweat. (The relief to my pride was huge!)

The Lord spoke to me though this frustrating experience. In the same way that I was trying unsuccessfully to build a puzzle with the wrong picture in mind, so many sincere believers are trying to build their life with a wrong picture of God in mind. *If we have a broken or incomplete picture of God, we will have a broken or incomplete walk with God.* We are only as strong as our concept of who God is.

What is your picture of God?

For simplicity sake, let us consider five pictures we may have of God and the ditches that we inevitably land in if we do not anchor them in the revelation of who God in essence is.

CREATOR? Many people view God essentially as a Creator. Of course, God is our Creator and as His creation we have incredible privileges and sober responsibilities. But too often those who view Him essentially as Creator begin to relate to Him as a “Distant Relative” or worse yet, an “Impersonal Force”. The result is that they believe He is everywhere but live like He is nowhere!

PROVIDER? Others view God essentially as a Provider. Again, God is without doubt our Provider and we can be assured of His care and provision. Yet those who view Him essentially as Provider begin to relate to Him as a “Cosmic Butler” or worse, a “Slot-Machine in the Sky”. The result is that they believe that God exists for them and their benefit...and are highly offended if He does not deliver on demand.

LORD? Still others view God essentially as a Lord*. He is Lord...our King, our Supreme Ruler. Amen! But those who view Him essentially as Lord end up relating to Him as a “Drill Sergeant” or worse still, “The Divine Kill-Joy”. The result is that the precious, intimate relationship God intends for us is stifled by a thousand rules, demands and obligations.

SAVIOUR? Many today view God essentially as a Saviour. And thank God He is our Saviour; we are saved...not by what we do, but by what He has done! However, those who view God essentially as Saviour tend to slide into the ditch of relating to God as a “Sin-Collector” or tragically, when in need: “The Instant Guilt-Remover”.

FRIEND? Finally, others view God essentially as a Friend. Certainly today more and more followers of Christ are revelling in what it means to enjoy fellowship with God and walk with Him as Friend. But those who view Him essentially as Friend often slide into relating to God as a “Buddy” and develop casual attitudes toward Him like: “God and I are tight!”

While God is certainly a Creator, a Provider, a Lord, a Saviour and a Friend, it should be clear how a picture of God that anchors in any one of these, at the exclusion of the others, can become a distorted view of who God is.

*Although most Bibles use the word, “**Lord**,” they are actually, in most cases, translating the word “Yahweh” (*Jehovah*), “Our Covenant Father”. The NKJV and the NIV both use this word “LORD” but do so in uppercase (as indicated) to clearly distinguish when this covenant name for God is used. The Hebrew word for “Lord” – meaning, “Supreme Ruler, Absolute Controller” – is *Adonai* and although this word does certainly reveal God as our Supreme Ruler, it does not appear nearly as frequently as the word *Jehovah*, “Our Covenant Father”. While the word *Adonai* appears 439 times; *Jehovah* is the foremost revelation of God in the Old Testament used 6,828 times.

We live in a world today where people know a lot *about* God; yet, often, *this knowledge about God restricts an intimate relationship with God*. There is a world of difference between knowing about God and knowing God; and we are invited to know Him personally, intimately and deeply. For example, becoming a theologian does not guarantee a quality relationship with God. Those who knew the Old Testament best; were the first to reject the One it revealed!

Of course, a passionate pursuit of God involves study and learning. We are called to be His disciples (learners); and there is simply no subject more comprehensive, more satisfying, more intense, more enriching and more life-changing than the quest to grow in the knowledge of God Himself. But here is the point: we must purpose to grow in the knowledge of God Himself; not merely knowledge about God. Paul warned us: “**Knowledge (in and by itself) puffs up**” (1 Corinthians 8:1).

All devotion...all learning...all study...should be centred on knowing Him; growing in an experiential knowledge of His character and His ways. *Our thirst for knowledge is to transform our lives with revelation, not to fill our heads with information*. And each mouthful of fresh revelation of God’s glory should result in an inner change, from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:18), so that my responsibility to my marriage, to my family, to my community and to my world are energised with His Divine Life.

God is first and foremost our...

The beginning of this quest to know God
begins with a revelation of God as... **Father!**

CREATOR? Yes, God is a Creator but only because He is first and foremost a Father. *As our Father, He created us in His image and likeness that we may be His children.* His Father's touch is seen in our individual beauty and uniqueness; not one of us is the same! The Father's finger-print is upon each of us so that we all have our own unique finger-print!

PROVIDER? Yes, God is a Provider but only because He is first and foremost a Father. *As our Father, He provides for us His children.* And like any good father, He will – at times – withhold the provision from the child if the provision will spoil the child. Certainly, if our motives are selfish and bratty, we should expect Him to discipline us instead of throwing more toys our way. (I realize this is a revolutionary thought to many!)

LORD? Yes, God is our Lord but only because He is first and foremost a Father. *As our Father, He governs us and leads us.* He knows how best this life is to be lived...having created it in the first place! His rules are not there to restrict the enjoyment of life, but to enhance it. In the same way that the rules of a sport protect the participants, bringing order and maximum enjoyment of the game, so God's government does the same.

SAVIOUR? Yes, God is our Saviour but only because He is first and foremost a Father. *As our Father, He immediately sought to rescue us when we fell.* Father God's love bankrupted heaven to send Jesus to deliver us and forgive us. Oh, yes His forgiveness cleanses us from all sin but the same grace that saved us continues to sustain us; enabling us to walk with our Father in holiness and faith.

FRIEND? Yes, God is our Friend but only because He is first and foremost a Father. *As our Father, He amazingly desires our fellowship and friendship with us.* This awesome reality does not negate that He is first our Father; He is not our buddy or our "china". My own natural father is among my best friends; but he remains my father! In awe and reverence of our heavenly Father, we respond to His awesome invitation of friendship.

God hangs His identity on Fatherhood...

Think of this. God could have picked any foundational name to hang His identity on. Of course, He reveals Himself as Creator, Provider, Saviour, Lord and even Friend... In fact, we know He reveals Himself by many names to help us understand His character and the various attributes of His wonderfully comprehensive and delightful personality. But as a foundational name, He could have easily and rightfully chosen the title, "Great and Awesome, Sovereign God". And in so doing, everything from Him would then have been essentially defined around this. Our identity would then have been that of a slave: obligated to serve Him, robotic in our existence; and the highest we could attain would be to swear blind allegiance to His commands, suffering punishment for one indiscretion.

But this is not what God did. Instead, He reveals Himself essentially as a Father. An incredible example of this is found in two passages in Isaiah. Through this prophet, God speaks to His backslidden people. They have forsaken and rejected Him. But how does God choose to respond? God says: **“Come now, and let us reason together...though your sins are like scarlet...”** (Isaiah 1:18). Wow! Here is the Almighty Sovereign talking to His backslidden creation that has actively rebelled against Him...and He invites them...He appeals to them: **“Come now...let us reason together”**. When He could have just squashed them like bugs, He invites them to fellowship with Him...to talk to Him...to re-enter communication with Him. The picture is of a father who still believes the best of his children, trying to assure and affirm their relationship with him.

Later when He is then accused of neglecting these rebels...(Did you get that... they have betrayed Him, but lash out with false accusations to justify their sin!)...God says, **“Can a woman forget her nursing child...? Surely they may forget. Yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands”** (Isaiah 49:15). When He could have clenched His fist at them and written them off, He opens up His heart and makes Himself vulnerable. He appeals to them, choosing a metaphor of a nursing mother. Could a mother forget her new born infant nursing from her breast? The overwhelming response would be: never! Yet, God says that a nursing mother is more likely to forget her baby than He is of forgetting them! The picture is of a broken-hearted parent weeping; tears streaming down his face and falling into his open hands in which he pictures his child secure and safe. Wow!

We could recount passage after passage revealing the Father’s heart towards His people. But consider just one more. Through the prophet Hosea God reveals His Father’s heart, appealing to backslidden Israel. He says: **“When Israel was a child, I loved him. And out of Egypt I called My son. But the more I called them, the further they went from Me... I taught [them] to walk, taking them by their arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love, and I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them.... [But] My people are bent on backsliding from Me. Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt [Me]. How can I give you up...? How can I hand you over...? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger”** (Hosea 11:1-9).

God reminds Israel that He was intimately involved in fathering them, even though they did not recognize or honour Him for doing so: **“When Israel was a child, I loved him...I taught [them] to walk, taking them by their arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love, and I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them...”**

When Israel consistently rebelled against God, exhausting His grace and provoking His justice, God still appeals to them, this time revealing His broken-heartedness and the intense emotions of pain and grief: **“My people are bent on backsliding from Me... How can I give you up...? How can I hand you over...? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred...”**

The Almighty, Sovereign Creator of the Universe reveals Himself to us essentially as Father. No other religion does this. The gods of other religions are not personal; they are either raging tyrants demanding religious effort to appease them...or they are distant creators always too busy or simply disinterested...or worse still, they are some concoction of man's imagination that has no power to intervene or deliver.

What about the Trinity?

Embracing God as Father does not undermine the Trinity, or in anyway undermine God the Son and God the Spirit. We worship and serve the Three-in-One God, the Trinity, or as Paul reveals Him: **“the Godhead”** (Colossians 2:9). While the concept of the Trinity often (always!) blows our finite minds*, the fact is that grasping the Father-heart of God not only reminds us of the distinctive beauty of each member of the Godhead but also brings revelatory clarity to understanding God the Son and God the Spirit.

*Two illustrations may help in understanding the Trinity.

- (1) Water. Water can exist in three forms: liquid, ice and steam. Although water can exist in these three forms it remains essentially water. In this analogy, water in liquid form may represent God the Father, from whom all life flows; ice may represent the Son, in whom our faith is secure; and steam may represent God the Spirit. This analogy does break down in that although God is at all times three in one, water can only exist in one form at a time. The second analogy is therefore even better.
- (2) The Triangle. While each corner of a triangle is *distinct in shape and size*, they together form *one* triangle. If you remove just one corner, you know longer have a triangle.

Both these analogies are helpful to our finite minds that can only grasp infinite truth to a degree. Even Paul said, **“now we see in a mirror, dimly”** (1 Corinthians 13:12). But this is a comforting fact. If we could fully wrap our minds around the awesomeness of God, He would be no bigger than our minds...and not much of a god to worship and serve. Praise God that He is bigger...much, much bigger...than my “little” mind!

First of all, in our pursuit to explore the heights and depths of God's awesomeness, we must remind ourselves that He is the awesome “Three-In-One” God. He is not “three-separate-gods” nor is He “one-god-who-disguises-himself-in-three-masks”. **“The Lord God is One”** (Deuteronomy 6:4); yet He is three Persons in One: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; the same in essence, distinct in personality, but equal in power and glory (see Matthew 3:16, 17; Ephesians 2:18).

Secondly, let us remind ourselves that Jesus Himself used the word **“Father”** to describe God more than any other word*. In fact, He expressly declared that He came to reveal the Father: **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me”** (John 14:6). Notice, He did not say, “No one comes to heaven...” Nor did He say, “No one gets a better life...”. God the Son reveals God the Father: **“No one comes to the Father...”**

*Some rightly point out that the word **“Father”** is not used very frequently of God in the Old Testament. While this is true it does not take into account that the covenant name of God, **“Yahweh”** (transliterated into the better known word, **Jehovah**), can be translated as **“Covenant Father”**. This word is used over 6,800 times and is the primary revelation of God in the Old Testament. There are many expressions, or names, that are derived from this name **Jehovah** such as **Jehovah Jireh** – “Our Covenant Provider” – and **Jehovah Rophe** – “Our Covenant Healer” – to mention just two. What is often missed is that all these expressions are indeed characteristics of God's Father-heart. The Old Testament certainly carried the concept of God's Father-heart in embryonic form, a seed that germinated into full bloom through Jesus' life and teachings.

Yes, heaven is a blessing of the redeemed. But heaven is only heaven because of who is going to be there. Heaven is only going to be heaven because Father God is there! And yes, following God's will does lead to a better life. But our life is only enriched because of who we now know. The better life is only possible when it is lived from the Father's perspective and in His counsel. Jesus did not come to essentially promise us a place but to invite us into a relationship with Father; He did not essentially promise us a better life but to welcome us into the loving arms of Father God.

Over and over again Jesus stated emphatically that He came in response to His Father's desire, that He only did what brought His Father pleasure and that He came to reveal what His Father was like. ***We cannot fully grasp God the Son until we grasp God the Father who sent Him to restore us into relationship with Himself as His children.***

Thirdly, let us remind ourselves that Jesus called the Holy Spirit, **"the Promise of the Father"** (Acts 1:4, 5). Was not Jesus Himself the Promised Messiah? Yes...in part. God promised the Messiah throughout the Old Testament ***but made it clear that His full intention was to indwell His children with His very being.*** Thus the promised Messiah was in part "God in the flesh" because only as a Man could He accomplish what He did. But the promised Messiah was fully received when "God by the Spirit" indwelt us in conversion. God as a Man could not indwell us; He could and did die on our behalf paving the way for God the Spirit to indwell our blood-washed lives.

Jesus, in teaching about the coming Spirit, expressed the Father's desire: **"I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you...At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you"** (John 14:18, 20 c. 16, 17). Paul then wonderfully describes this miracle, when our orphan-hearts are healed and we grasp the Father's heart by the indwelling Spirit: **"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ"** (Romans 8:14-17).

Paul reveals here that God's children can know Him intimately because of the indwelling Spirit of the Father, who prompts us to cry out **"Abba, Father"**. The word **"Abba"** is Aramaic for "Daddy". It in fact comes from the simple word **"Ab"** which, according to the Hebrews, was the first sound their infant children could make in reference to their mother or father. Hence, it is the purest and greatest expression of dependence on parental love. The Spirit awakens the deepest recesses of our soul to the love and affection of Father God.

Paul actually refers to the **"Spirit of adoption"**. However, the adoption he refers to is not the concept of adoption we know today. In Hebrew culture, a father would adopt his own son at the age of thirteen, an act that would affirm his pride in his son – an expression of the father's blessing: **"This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased"** – and invite his son into adulthood; a more mature relationship in fellowship and a recognition of his inheritance in the family business. Hence, the phrase, **"if children, then heirs..."**

God the Spirit continues to reveal God the Father. Again, *we cannot fully grasp God the Spirit until we grasp God the Father who sent His Spirit to indwell us, to make His home in us, and to fully restore us as His children into His inheritance.*

Paul taught the function of each member of the Godhead in sublime simplicity in one verse to the Ephesian church: **“For through [Jesus], we both have access by one Spirit to the Father”** (Ephesians 2:18). Notice: we come **“to”** the Father, **“through”** the Son, **“by”** the Spirit. The focus of our attention is to be on the Father and we have access to Him through what Jesus has done and by the Spirit who indwells us*.

*So who should we pray to? Essentially we are to pray to the Father, led by the Spirit, in the Name (and nature) of Jesus. All the prayers in the New Testament are directed to the Father; some of them also include Jesus (see Acts 4:24-30; Romans 1:8-10; 1 Corinthians 1:4-9; 2 Corinthians 1:3, 4; Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Philippians 1:3-11; Colossians 1:9-12; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12; Philemon 4-6; Hebrews 13:20, 21). This does not mean we cannot address Jesus and the Holy Spirit (see Ezekiel 37:1-10). We can and should...enjoying a liberty in our worshipful prayer and enjoying the Personhood of the Son and the Spirit, not just the Father. As God, the Son and the Spirit deserve and receive our worship and prayer. However, we would be wise to, generally speaking, direct our prayers to the Father, while we ensure that we maintain an awareness and relationship with each member of the Godhead. Too often, we can just jumble words together, like “O Father Jesus...” without thought. This tends to happen when we are praying religiously in form and without thought. Yes, prayer should be from the heart but this does not mean that it should be mindless. As we commune with God from our heart to His, we should allow our mind to focus on each member of the Godhead and worship, supplicate and interceded in response to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let’s recap...

In the last few pages we considered the implications to the Trinity. If it made things a little technical, we apologize. Discussing the Godhead often gets a little...(okay, a lot!)...complicated. If we have muddied the waters, let us then sum up the core point of this article.

Narrow views of God and the ditches we may fall into...

Concept of God	Ditch if exclusive
Creator	Distant-Relative or Impersonal-Force
Provider	Cosmic-Butler or Slot-Machine-in-the-Sky
Lord	Drill-Sergeant or Divine Kill-Joy
Saviour	Sin-Collector or Guilt-Remover
Friend	Buddy or My-China

Grasping the Father-heart of God brings balance...

Foundational Revelation	Characteristics of Father-God	Our Blessing
<i>Father</i>	Creator	We are created uniquely
	Provider	We are provided for wisely
	Lord	We are governed fairly
	Saviour	We are forgiven graciously
	Friend	We are befriended intimately

A parable with a knock-out punch...

Luke, Chapter 15 is famous for what is called, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son;” but this is a poor choice of title for this parable. Jesus does not tell us one but three parables and the third builds pointedly on the first two to reveal “The Father’s Love”.

Luke opens the setting for these three parables by revealing Jesus’ audience (vv. 1-3). The religious establishment of the day were aggravated beyond comprehension at Jesus’ open-hearted and generous acceptance of the dregs of society; the lost, the last and the least. **“This Man receives sinners, and even eats with them!”** complained the indignant religious leaders. “Skanda!” (You just can’t top this Afrikaans expression for “scandal”!)

Jesus then tells them, not one, but three parables. This is, of course, significant. Jesus never did this. Whatever He said was of vital importance, and He expected His followers to take Him and His words very seriously. The fact that Jesus tells three parables to hammer one point, and concludes with one of the longest parables He ever told, meant that what Jesus revealed about God was not only so very, very important but was also so very, very difficult for us to get.

First, Jesus tells the parable of the faithful shepherd who will go “**hunting-high-and-low**” until “A-ha!” he finds his lost sheep (vv. 4-7). Then he tells the parable of the faithful woman who goes on a search and discovery mission to find her missing coin (vv. 8-10). The words that He uses to express the elation of heaven – **“rejoicing”** (v. 5), **“rejoice”** (v. 6) and **“more joy”** (v. 7) – are in stark contrast to His audience’s cold and gloomy attitude toward those they considered **“sinners”**.

As if Jesus had not made His point; He then goes for the jugular. In a kind of jab-jab-and-knock-out, Jesus then tells the parable of the faithful Father...”The Parable of the Father’s Love”...revealing the love of the Father not just for lost sheep; not just for a lost coin; but for His...beloved children. This is really not a parable about the prodigal son; it is a parable about the Father’s love and it is a story directed to the religious leaders represented by the older brother in the story. The younger, prodigal son only features to expose the older, religious brother’s hard-heart and to reveal the extravagance of the Father’s lavish, unconditional love.

According to the Jewish law on inheritance, the older son would receive two-thirds of the inheritance, and the younger son would receive one-third. A Jewish father brought his children into their inheritance while he was still alive, and in this story, the father clearly released both sons into their inheritance at this time (v. 12).

The next few verses highlight the popular, well-known account of how the younger, prodigal son wasted his heritage in wild living, only coming to his senses after being forced to scarp for a meal with a pig...not exactly a kosher moment (vv. 13-19). But let’s pick up the less popular account of what the older son did not do with his inheritance.

Notice the way Jesus describes the oldest son's actions and reactions. First we learn that **“the older son was in the field”** working (v. 25). When confused by the sounds of celebration, who did he inquire of? Not his father; instead **“he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant”** (v. 26). On hearing that his younger, troubled and disgraced brother had finally returned home safely, what is his reaction? Joy? No. Relief? No. **“But he was angry and would not go in”** (v. 28). His immediate reaction was anger...and then to pout and sulk! And was he angry that his brother had broken his father's heart? Sadly...no. Was he righteously angry that his brother had brought shame upon their family? Oh, no! He whined and complained bitterly, saying, **“you never gave me a young goat that I might make merry with my friends”** (v. 29).

The older son lived in the same home as his father but never knew the heart of his father. How many times would he have seen his grieving father pacing up and down the porch, scanning the horizon with longing for even a glimpse of the prodigal son? How many times would he have seen his broken-hearted father bent over in sorrow, weeping for his lost son? Did he share his father's grief? No. Did he carry he's father's burden? Sadly, no.

The older brother, symbolic of the religious leaders, focused on his efforts – his self-interests, his stake, on what he did not have – rather than on relationship with his father: **“Lo, these many years I have been serving you”** (v. 29). Never once did he share his father's heart. He missed the point: relationship with his father.

I recall reading about an advert that appeared in the classified section of a newspaper. The advert was short and to the point:

“Single man with 160 irrigated acres of fertile land seeks marriage-minded woman with tractor. In replying, please send picture of tractor”.

Talk about missing the point!

And herein lies the key issue: the older brother found his **identity** in what he did; rather than in who he was. *The sad truth is that he was more a servant than a son, even though he had already been given his inheritance.* Unless we live in a clear revelation of God as our Father, and thus derive our identity from that revelation, we will continually miss the point. *Our destiny hinges on a clear sense of identity, and our identity is borne in a clear revelation of God's Fatherhood.*

Until we know whose we are, we will never know who we are. Until we understand whose we are; who we belong to, who we are birthed from; who we derive our identity from...we will never know who we are. We will spend our life trying to find something we already have in Him!

Identity...

Experts tell us that we get our identity – our sense of personal-worth – primarily from our parents, mainly from our father. They teach us that the feeling of being valuable is the product of parental love, and this conviction must be gained in childhood before the age of ten. If we do not develop this vital sense of worth by then, there is little chance of ever grasping it.

The psychologists are right...to a point. Or better said, “They are right but not complete”. First the Bible also underscores the vital role of parenting in the development of a secure and significant child, capable of facing adulthood. **“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it”** (Proverbs 22:6). But the Bible goes on to provide a powerful answer for those who have not had an ideal upbringing. There is hope for this orphaned society. What can Christ-followers do to rise above the unintentional inadequacies or negligence of their natural parents? What resources are there to those who have suffered the horrors of abusive parents? For those without Christ there is a wicked dead-end, but for the children of God there is an awesome solution! Of course, we need to restore our relationship with our parents if it is damaged, but that alone would not restore the damage to our soul. You see, ***we cannot undo a bad childhood; but we can supersede it!***

Fortunately for us, Paul faced a generation similar to ours in some ways, a confused generation whose concept of family and parenting had been shattered apart by pagan stupidity. But the Lord used this apostle as a master builder to reveal the true children of God. Paul taught the principle of ***adoption!*** **“For you did not receive the spirit of bondage... but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry our, ‘Abba, Father’”** (Romans 8:15).

Too often we preach rebirth but forget the importance of adoption. Jesus did not just come to save us; He came to bring us back to Father. ***There is no salvation until we are secure in Father’s arms!*** Too often we “sell” eternal fire insurance; not realizing that most people today feel: “What good is eternal fire insurance if I’m experiencing hell in my life right now!” The greatest need of the human heart is not the assurance of eternal security, but the desperate need for security in the Father’s heart now! The fact that this security is eternal is a wonderful but secondary blessing.

Paul taught a formal transference of parenthood to God Himself. And not only must those who have had a difficult upbringing discover Father personally, deeply and intimately; but even those who have enjoyed a good upbringing must discover the dynamic reality of God’s Fatherhood. ***The damage of childhood can be healed through a new father – our Heavenly Father – who parents us with perfect love, when we allow Him to become a functioning father to us*** (see Hebrews 12:5-11).

This is absolutely key. We have to throw away our theoretical clichés of Father God. This is not just a kid’s Bible story. We have to consciously and deliberately yield to His functional parenting in our lives. We have to ask Father to parent us in how we think;

how we manage our attitudes and emotions; how we make decisions; how we relate to others and our world about us; how we respond to difficulty and adversity.

Why would Jesus go so out of His way to stress that we must be childlike in our faith? In fact, His words are scary: **“unless...you become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven”** (Matthew 18:2). Let’s be clear: we are not to be **childish**. God calls us to grow up. Great weight is placed on the need to grow in maturity, understanding the ways of our Father. He calls us to lay aside all our selfishness and childishness. But then He urges us to maintain a **childlike** faith in Him; active in our yielding to His functional parenting. As we shed our childishness; we must maintain and foster the innocent, trusting dependence of a child.

I need to define myself as a child...and do so regularly through prayerful evaluation and reflection. Everything in me wants to rather define myself as an accomplished, successful person. But in terms of my relationship with God, I have to define myself as a child. **“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right [privilege and responsibility] to become children of God”** (John 1:12). And I can only define myself as a child, when I embrace a revelation of His fatherhood. ***God can only functionally Father me if I am actively fostering a childlike attitude.***

At our core...

Let us take a moment to spotlight this issue of identity because it is just so crucial. Several words can be used to describe the walk of faith, and again for simplicity, let us select just a few: son, steward, servant and soldier. Unless we understand the Father-heart of God and thus derive our essential identity as son first we will fall into a few ditches, incorrectly understanding who we are and what He has called us to do.

STEWARDS? Yes, we are called to be stewards of all that God has entrusted to us (1 Peter 4:10). But unless we first derive our identity as a son, we will never be faithful stewards...we will hold things too tightly, failing to entrust to God what is His. Instead of stewards, we become hoarders and end up deriving our identity ***in what we have.***

SERVANTS? Yes, we are called to be servants of the Lord, revealing Him to others (Matthew 20:26). But unless we first derive our identity as a son, we will never be faithful servants...we will serve others for our own benefit with mixed motives, seeking attention or approval for what we do. Instead of servants, we become slaves and incorrectly derive our identity ***from what we do.***

SOLDIERS? Yes, we are called to be soldiers of Christ, battling the forces of darkness to establish the Kingdom of our God (2 Timothy 2:3). But unless we first derive our identity as a son, we will never be faithful soldiers...we will consistently fight the wrong battles, looking to defend our turf and protect our self-interests. In this case, instead of soldiers, we become renegades and error in deriving our identity ***in what we battle.***

SONS FIRST! When we define ourselves as sons first; we find our sense of personal worth in Him and Him alone. Then...

- ...we can be faithful stewards, saying, “I’m a son, and therefore I look after all I have as a gift from Father which I will ultimately return to Him for account” instead of “I have worked for all that I have and will do whatever I must to keep it. Everything ultimately depends on me. If I don’t look after number one, no one else will”.
- ...we can be faithful servants, saying, “I’m a son, and therefore serve for my Father’s pleasure and delight” instead of “I use others to fill my own need for affirmation, approval or recognition”.
- ...we can be faithful soldiers, saying, “I’m a son, and therefore I only fight the battles my Father deems important” instead of “I fight the battles that trigger me off; battles that validate my sense of worth or that move my sense of injustice”.

When we grasp God’s Father-heart and accept the privilege (and responsibility) of our sonship in Him, we are empowered to live life as He intended...*because every child is empowered by the Presence of his Father.*

Grasping the Father-heart of God enables us to embrace our own identity:

Foundational Revelation	Characteristics of Father-God	Our Identity	Our Role
Father	Creator	<i>Son</i>	Steward
	Provider		Soldier
	Lord		Servant
	Saviour		
	Friend		

A lesson on parenting from parenting...

Without doubt, being a father to my own two children has been the single most enriching revelation of God the Father other than the Bible itself. To sense the selfless, unconditional love of a parent flowing through my entire being reveals something of Father God’s love to me, to some degree at least. This is perhaps why Paul encouraged Timothy and Titus to ideally choose elders from those who have children of their own (1 Timothy 3:1-5; Titus 1:5, 6).

My wife and I have always encouraged our children to express themselves through, among other things, painting and drawing. We have gone through reams of paper determined to give them a continual new and blank page to express their little imaginations. Initially, their “work of art” was a sum total of blotches and scratches, but with much encouragement – genuine delight at “baby strokes” – and a continued supply of “try-again” blank paper; slowly, slowly, they began to learn how to express their creativity in more distinguishable pictures. Does not Father God do the same with us?

Some assume God is expecting perfection from day one and every day following. Any attempt that colours outside the lines will get a crack behind the ears and a heavy scolding...no place for expression: "If at first you don't succeed...shame on you!" The result: so many live trapped by a fear of failure. But no decent father would treat his children this way. And the writer to the Hebrews reminds us that our earthly fathers parented us **"as seemed best to them"** but our heavenly Father parents us **"for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness"** (Hebrews 12:10).

As each day dawns, Father presents us with a new "blank page" to express ourselves in line with His delight. Jeremiah described it this way: **"the Lord's mercies...are new every morning"** (Lamentations 3:22, 23). No matter what a mess we have made before, each new day opens alive with the possibilities of forgiveness, restoration and a new start. No wonder Paul cheered: **"now is the day of salvation"** (2 Corinthians 6:2). As we awaken to each new day and align ourselves with Him, He gives us another "clean slate". In this way, the Father's kiss enlarges us...and we share of His Divine nature.

The Father's pleasure...

Jesus ended this parable in Luke, Chapter 15 with an uppercut aimed at the religious jaw of those He squared off against. He concluded in such a way that He expected the older son, and by extension, the religious leaders to be convinced of the Father's love. **"It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found"** (v. 32). Although we do not know if the older son ever caught his father's heart, we do know that most of the religious leaders did not. But let us make sure we do.

Throughout these three parables, Jesus gives us an amazing inside peek behind the curtain of heaven. He used the word **"rejoice"**, **"rejoicing"** or **"joy"** five times from verses 5-10 as the prime activity of heaven. He even refers to degrees of joy that the host of heaven experience in the Father's Presence (v. 7). He then powerfully and extravagantly paints the picture of Father's joy as He describes the reunion between the prodigal and his father, detailing the celebratory party held to express the father's love (vv. 11-32).

While teaching on the purposes of God and mankind, during a foundations class, I was once asked why God created us. The question was asked in a way that said, rather refreshingly, I get all these theological answers but... "Why? Why would a self-sufficient God, totally enjoying the community of the Trinity, entirely satisfied and fulfilled in Himself, create us?" Suddenly the light went on for me. I answered, "Father God was having a party and wanted us to share in the fun". And for all the theological answers I have, which are Biblically true and correct, this one remains my favourite.

Listen... the Father is inviting you to the party:

"Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

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CrossWave



Written by
Craig Kirkby

January 2000

Recently edited
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WEB

www.crosswaveglobal.com

MAIL

craig@crosswaveglobal.com

