

FATHER IN HEAVEN

Matthew 6v9

Last week we revelled in the great Biblical truth that God is our Father. He loves us as sons and daughters. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1) This week we see that God is not only our “Father”; He is our “Father in Heaven.”

Yet calling God “Heavenly Father” may stir a variety of emotions according to our experience of earthly fathers.

Some of us have never known our earthly father.

We may have been born outside of marriage and our father’s name has been a closely guarded secret or simply not known. We may have been abandoned by our father. He may have walked out of home and never been seen again, or perhaps divorce and remarriage made him a distant figure. Some of us had father’s who died when we were young so we never had a chance to get to know them. My own dad died when I was three; I have a few black and white photos but no memories.

Tom Smail starts his book “the Forgotten Father” (Hodder & Stoughton. 1980) like this: *“I never knew my own father; he died when I was too young to realise what I had lost, but I have been discovering slowly ever since. We are all shaped by our lacks as much as by our gifts, for none of us starts complete. I mention my own lack of a father at the outset, because I am aware that it affects the perspective from which I approach the subject of this book – the fatherhood of God.... It is where we are most thirsty that we shall be most likely to drink”*. Smail goes on to say that his book is *“the theology of a grown up little boy, who in middle life became very conscious that he had no father, and who therefore has become exalted and joyful in realising that he has always had a Father God.”*

Some of us have painful memories of an earthly father.

Before some of us can relate effectively to God as our Heavenly Father, we need to be released from negative attitudes towards fatherhood picked up from our own family background. Some of us have had fathers who never showed affection, or who set impossible standards and then withheld their approval. Some have had fathers who showed a preference for one child over another, or were so absorbed in their careers that they were like strangers to their children. Some even have memories of physical violence. There are different forms of neglect and abuse by fathers which can leave you feeling anxious and insecure and may lead to a troubled life.

Back in the 1980’s Floyd McClung wrote his classic little book ‘The Father Heart of God.’ He and his family lived and worked in the neediest urban areas

in Kabul (Afghanistan) and Amsterdam (Holland) among drug pushers, prostitutes, and damaged young people. Again and again he came across the same root issue - abuse or neglect by fathers. He begins the book recalling a visit to a Museum in Amsterdam with his two children. They looked at a painting on a large canvas *“painted in sweeping, childlike strokes. It depicted a tall, sticklike figure with a huge square shaped head. The dark colours and lifeless form gave it a sense of coldness and harshness. The beaklike nose and great protruding arms almost made him seem like a monster. The title on the painting was ”Man”, but according to one of the guides the original title to Karel Appel’s work was ”My father”. We discussed the painting for a long time. What kind of relationship did Karel Appel have with his father? Even more important, we discussed how that affected his view of God. We wondered if Karel Appel believed in God and if so, did he believe him to be a loving Father?”* (Floyd McClung: ‘The Father Heart of God’ Kingsway. 1985)

If your experience of an earthly father is painful, here is the good news: you have a Father in Heaven whose great love has divine power to heal you from every wound and every disappointment.

Some of us have been blessed with a loving earthly father.

Some fathers are loving and faithful and fun. They have a godly character, they work hard but they also have a twinkle in their eye and are full of surprises. They are men to admire – good models for sons (of how to be a good husband and dad) and daughters (what to look for in a good husband). If your father is like this and is still around, then cherish him! Some here had fathers like this but they are gone now; yet any sadness you feel is permeated with joy. No father is perfect of course, but some of us have had experience of an earthly father which has enriched us. For some that has been true of step fathers or adoptive fathers too.

One of Jesus’ most famous parables concerned a loving father who welcomed back a prodigal son with open arms - an earthly father who gives us a glimpse of our Heavenly Father. For some, there are no hurdles to overcome from personal experience when they call God “Father”.

So, what about our Father in Heaven?

1. The majesty of our Father in Heaven

Last week we saw that we could come like a child to God in the most intimate way, saying “Father!” But while God is intimate, He is also transcendent. God is personal – but He is also a Father in heaven who reigns in power and majesty and glory.

In one of C.S. Lewis’ ‘Letters to Malcolm’ he writes: *“I fully agree that the relationship between God and man is more private and intimate than any possible relation between two fellow creatures. Yes, but at the same time there is, in another way, a greater distance between the participants... We*

ought to be simultaneously aware of closest proximity and infinite distance. You make things far too snug and confiding. Your analogy needs to be supplemented by "I fell at his feet as one dead".'

The apostle John recalled a revelation of heaven. "All the angels were standing round the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (Revelation 7v11,12)

And yet this majesty and sovereignty of our Father in Heaven is not to make us cringe; it is truth to empower us – to give us solid ground to stand on. This is all the more true if you feel anxious and insecure. You might think that all you need is a Father who gives warm hugs. But when you feel most vulnerable perhaps you also need a God of majesty and power.

In his book 'The Supremacy of God in Preaching' (Kingsway.1990), John Piper writes: *"People are starving for the greatness of God. But most of them would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives. The majesty of God is an unknown cure. There are far more popular prescriptions on the market but the benefit of any other remedy is brief and shallow. Preaching that does not have the aroma of God's greatness may entertain for a season, but it will not touch the hidden cry of the soul: "Show me thy glory!" Years ago during the January prayer week at our church I decided to preach on the holiness of God from Isaiah 6. I resolved on the first Sunday of the year to unfold the vision of God's holiness found in the first four verses of that chapter. So I preached on the holiness of God and did my best to display the majesty and glory of such a great and holy God. I gave not one word of application to the lives of the people. Application is essential in the normal course of preaching, but I felt led that day to make a test: Would the passionate portrayal of the greatness of God in and of itself meet the needs of people? I didn't realize that not long before this Sunday one of the young families of our church discovered that their child was being sexually abused by a close relative. It was incredibly traumatic. They were there that Sunday morning and sat under that message. I wonder how many advisers to us pastors would have said: "Can't you see your people are hurting? Can't you come down out of the heavens and get practical? Don't you realize what kind of people sit in front of you on Sunday?" Some weeks later I learned the story. The husband took me aside one Sunday after a service. "John", he said, "these have been the hardest months of our lives. Do you know what has gotten us through? The vision of the greatness of God's holiness that you gave me the first week of January. It has been the rock we could stand on."*

We have a Father in Heaven, reigning on high in majestic power and glory.

2. The riches of our Father in Heaven

Some of our sons and daughters are very aware of the contrast between themselves and fellow students at university. We have a nephew at Durham

and his circle all seem to have wealthy fathers giving them generous allowances. His own dad is a vicar on a meagre stipend. So, what about our Heavenly Father? Do you sometimes feel that He is more like a poor vicar than a super-rich dad like, say, David Beckham?

The apostle Paul writes: “And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To **our God and Father** be glory for ever and ever.” (Philippians 4v19f.) Yet Paul wasn’t rich when he wrote this! In fact he was in prison for the gospel and had little more than the clothes on his back. So how could he write about God’s glorious riches”?

There are two great truths here. First: God knows all your needs and, as a Father, is committed to caring for you. In fact, only He can meet your deepest needs. Second: God seems to be more interested in making his sons and daughters rich in godly character and faith than in dispensing material riches. Like every good father, God is training his children.

I am currently reading Roger Steer’s biography of James Hudson Taylor. As a young man Taylor prepared himself for future ventures of faith in China by trusting his Heavenly Father to supply his needs in this country before he travelled overseas. Steer records one famous incident in Hull where Taylor is tested to the limit over giving away his last half a crown to destitute family with a dying mother and a starving new born baby - knowing all he has left when he gets home is enough porridge for one breakfast. Before he could do this, a battle over God’s Fatherhood went on in Taylor’s soul. “*Don’t despair*” he had said to the family, “*There’s a kind and loving Father in heaven.*” *But something inside said, “You hypocrite! Telling these people about a loving God, and not prepared yourself to trust Him without half a crown!”* Taylor won through and looked back to this incident as a cross roads in his life. (Steer: ‘Hudson Taylor: A Man in Christ’. p26-29. OMF Publishing 2001)

It would not be the last such challenge. God was training a son in godly character and faith - not just for mission in China but for eternity. A Heavenly Father was teaching him to invest from an early age in the Bank of Heaven. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”. (Matthew 6v19-21)

3. The love of our Father in Heaven

This week a film is to be released called “*The Pursuit of Happyness*” starring Will Smith as a lone father who finds himself evicted from his San Francisco apartment, along with his five year old son. At the same time he lands an internship at a prestigious firm of stockbrokers, and the film portrays their life as he works in the city and looks after his son while living in shelters and suffering many hardships. The film is not just about his struggle to fight his way up and out of his circumstances – but more importantly about being a good father and inspiring model to his little boy. The movie is based on the

real life story of Chris Gardner, now a rich business man in the U.S. In an interview the real life Gardner talked about the film, and then made this comment: *"So many men have got a hole in their soul the shape of their father."*

When you come to God as your Father in Heaven, His great love has divine power to fill any hole in your soul the shape of your father. But if you want to experience the power of the Father's love, you cannot by-pass the cross. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.(1 John 4v9,10) This is always at the centre of any good news about the Father's love. This theme inevitably takes us to the cross. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3v16) Those who work among the neediest and most damaged people are ill equipped without this message.

Earlier I mentioned Floyd McClung's book 'The Father Heart of God.' His great passion was sharing this good news of the Father's love in Jesus Christ with needy young people, especially in the red light districts of major cities. His book is full of stories of people set free by this message, especially those whose lives had been affected by a lack of fathering.

Because of my own experience of loss I paid special attention to one story concerning a shy teenager who sat down beside him in a crowded auditorium in South Africa after he had spoken about the Father Heart of God. *'She said "Can I cry on your shoulder?" "Sure," I said, "but can you tell me why?" Her eyes filled with tears as the story came out. Her father had died when she was very young. Since that time she had had nobody's shoulder to cry on, no daddy to talk to about her questions and disappointments, her achievements in school and plans for life. There was an ache in her heart. She desperately missed those big loving arms to hold her and comfort her. She cried on my shoulder, unashamedly, in front of her friends, and then we talked to our father in heaven. We asked him together to heal that ache and fill that missing part of her life. And he did. I saw the same girl a few years later when I was back in South Africa. I did not recognise her at first, but when she reminded me of that special time of prayer we had together the memories came flooding back. She thanked me for our time of prayer and told how it had made all the difference. In that short time together she had experienced the father heart of God.'*

The same can happen today for you as you come to your Father in Heaven.

John Wilthew. January 2007.