

THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

When the disciples wanted to know how to pray Jesus taught them to pray to God like He was their father (Lk. 11:1ff). He pointed out that our earthly fathers, who are evil, give good gifts to their children, and reasoned that our Heavenly Father would do even better. This was, at the time, a theological bombshell. Jewish people never thought of God as their personal father. He was considered the Father of the nation as in Deut. 32:6. He was considered the Father of the king as in 1 Chron. 17:13. But God was never considered as a personal father. In their minds, He was so high and lifted up that He could only be approached through a mediator or priest.

The Hebrew word for father is “ab”. It is used 1,195 times in the O. T. Scriptures, but only 15 times does it refer to God (13 times as a epithet and twice directly in prayer). Remember that the Hebrew people were so afraid of God that they would not even attempt to pronounce His name for fear that they would be taking it in vain. They never thought of praying to God as a father.

Calling God “Abba” or “Daddy” was even more offensive to the Jew. The New International Dictionary of N.T. Theology states: *“Nowhere in the entire wealth of devotional literature produced by ancient Judaism do we find “abba” being used as a way of addressing God”* (Vol. 1 p. 614). Yet this is precisely the way that Jesus prayed (Mk. 14:36), and this is also the way that Christians are taught to pray (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

Thinking of God as our Father helps us to focus on the dramatic difference between the Old Testament, and the New. In Old Testament times only the High Priest could approach God, and even then only under the strictest and most limited circumstances. Many of these limitations are listed in Lev. 16:1. As you know, the High Priest could only approach God one day in the year. If he was not properly clothed, or if he deviated from the divine rituals, he died. It must have been a frightening experience for the High Priest to enter into the presence of God. Christians, by contrast, enter boldly into the presence of God any time we want to (Heb. 10:19ff.) The blood of Jesus Christ, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, empower us to cry out “Abba - Father” (Gal. 4:6). We are not slaves any longer, we are sons.

We have an earthly father because he planted an earthly seed in the earthly womb, of our earthly mother. This earthly seed contains the DNA of our earthly father, and provides us with an earthly “image” or “likeness” of our earthly father. (1 Cor. 15:49). As you know, there is a great gulf between flesh and spirit. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God and neither does corruption inherit incorruption. (1 Cor. 15:50). That’s why we have to be born again!

Christians are born again, not of corruptible seed, but of the incorruptible, even the Word of God that lives and abides forever (1 Pet. 1:23). The Word of God is not physical, it is spiritual. Jesus said that the words which He spoke were “spirit” and “life” (John 6:63). Just as we received earthly life from an earthly seed, we can receive spiritual life from a spiritual seed (John 3:6). Just as the earthly seed provides us with the earthly image of our earthly father, the spiritual seed provides with the spiritual image of our spiritual Father. Our nature is changed because God’s seed abides in us (1 Jn. 3:9). The change is so dramatic that Christians are even called “new creations” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Biblical teaching about the Fatherhood of God is of particular value in maintaining the unity created by the Spirit. Philemon, for example, was a Christian in Colossae. Onesimus was his slave who ran away to Rome. When Onesimus was “born again” he automatically became a brother in Christ to the man he had defrauded. The unity they experienced, however, was somewhat fragile and they had to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3). These two brothers in the Family of God were separated by many miles, and many barriers. Paul’s letter to Philemon is a gracious reminder that our brotherhood in Christ is more important than any obstacle that separates us. God has children in every race, kindred, tongue and people. His children are both rich and poor and are found in every strata of society. As long as God is their Father, however, they are our brothers. If Jesus is not ashamed to call them brethren (Heb. 2:11), neither should we be ashamed to call them brethren.