

Finding the Father, God¹

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Bible references under various paragraphs can be used for personal or group study, to verify and clarify the points that have been made.

I had a very memorable experience with my father some months before he died. He was in his eighties and I often visited him in his unit. We talked about many things, mostly everyday things. On one of these occasions, I shared my heart more deeply than usual and spoke of things that I would not share with many, if any, other people. What we shared was not important of itself, just that they were things important to me. He listened, and smiled, and made some comments.

What surprised me was what happened as I drove away. I was crying—not my style usually—but there I was, sobbing deeply. Now, years later, I may have some idea of why this occurred, but basically, it opened up to me that the relationship between a son and father runs deep. Perhaps the same is true of all parent child relationships.

Years before this, I remember reading about a young man hopelessly caught in a drug habit. All the best resources of welfare, law and counselling had been provided and nothing seemed to change his situation. He told a newspaper reporter that his situation was quite simple really. He just needed a father who cared about him. We may suppose that there were other aspects to his story, but he had gone a long way to understanding the deep fault line in his life.

There are faults in all fathers, and to varying degrees, but the other side of the story is that children can close up to their parents because of those faults. We have no control over what our parents do or have done and their actions have profound effects on us, but I am persuaded that what parents have done is not as significant as what we do to ourselves when we close off a relationship with parents. What I mean by closing off a relationship is not necessarily leaving home but ceasing to receive what they have to give, ceasing to listen to their counsel and ceasing to care about them.

All parent child relationships are important because God is Father. He created us as his sons and daughters and all familyhood derives from him. He is Father and everything that he has made has his family quality about it. We cannot say that

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God is like our parents; rather, our parents were given to us as a witness, however imperfectly, to the fact that we are created to be sons and daughters of God and need to find our fullness in that relationship. If your memories of parents are not good ones, I hope you will not be deterred from letting God reveal his Fatherhood to you. Much depends on it.

Genesis 1:26; cf. Genesis 5:3; Eph. 3:14-15

Perhaps the thought that God is Father has not been clear before. Perhaps it has remained as a teaching with no personal meaning. We can teach one another that God is Father but the truth of it comes because God is actually Father to us. We need to see how he is doing this. We also need to see that we may have been closed off to his being Father and have shut down the riches of knowing him in this way. Actually, through our sinning, we died to God. Because that has happened, we need to be born again as his children. This is what Jesus came to bring about, but in fact, God's fathering didn't begin there.

Genesis 2:17; Luke 15:32; John 1:12-13

Israel as God's son

God was Father to Israel throughout their history, but, for most of this time, they rejected him. However, a time of great suffering came. The nation had been involved in all kinds of false worship and been given over as captives to their enemy. It was then that the cry of 'Father' came from Israel in the person of one of their prophets—Isaiah.

Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 32:5-6; Isaiah 1:2; Malachi 1:6

Isaiah said, 'You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel [Jacob] does not recognize us. You, O LORD, are our Father, Our Redeemer from of old is Your name.' The nation had drifted so far from knowing God that their own patriarchs would not recognise their own nation. However, God, the Father of the nation would still acknowledge them! If he ceased being Father to Israel when they abandoned him, Israel would have been totally without identity and destiny. There was no way they could make themselves what God had promised they would be.

Isa. 63:16; 64:8

Jesus may have had this exclamation in mind when he told his parable of the prodigal son. In fact, it was not so much a parable as a description of what had happened in Israel's history. They were either like the younger son and squandered God's gifts, or like the older son and, because of self-righteousness, been distant from the Father's loving.

Luke 15:11-32

Jesus, revealing 'our Father'

Jesus came to take Israel to their Father, and then, to gather all God's children who were scattered everywhere. He was the Son of God and delighted in his Father, but his teaching began, not with his Sonship but with ours. His famous Sermon on the Mount is full of reference to 'your Father' or 'your Father in heaven'.

John 11:51-52; Luke 10:21; Matt. 5-7

He said, 'Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify *your Father* who is in heaven.' What kind of works would glorify our Father? The answer to this can be found in the 'beatitudes' Jesus had spoken just before this. God would give his blessing to the poor in spirit, to those who mourned, to those who were gentle (as distinct from arrogant) and to those who hungered for righteousness of life and community. Then, because God's children depended on their Father, the Father would be honoured by their lives. It would be seen that he was the one who had made them what they were, and so, receive the glory.

Matt. 5:3-6, 16

The Father would be glorified in them because he would place them in his kingdom as participants with him in his reign. He would comfort them (not merely soothe them but strengthen them to truly live). He would give them the earth. He would lead them in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

People who strive to be great will not know God as their Father in heaven. True greatness is the gift of God. Abraham, the prophets, Jesus himself, and the apostles all tell us that God was the Maker of their lives and their works. They did not desire any greatness outside of that. The world tries to be something without God, but that is a sad way to live—a world without the Father.

Genesis 12:2; Psa. 57:2; Isa. 26:12; John 5:19; 12:49; 14:10; Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:13

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also showed Israel that if they knew their Father God, they would love their enemies and forgive them. They would know the Father's providence over his creation, and his forgiveness of sinners, and they would long for this to come to others. They would not need to display their piety but would be sure of the Father's rewards. Books could be written about children who are unsure of their parent's approval and do bizarre things to impress a passing crowd. This is tragic, and unnecessary, because God is the waiting Father.

Matt. 5:45; 6:1, 4, 6, 8, 14-15, 18

Jesus said to those who spent their life on food and drink and clothing and preserving their lives: 'Look at the birds of the air, ... they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet *your heavenly Father* feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? As our Father, he is the keeper of our lives.

Matt. 6:26, 32; 7:11

Jesus said these things to Israel to awaken them, but he knew that his teaching alone would not lead anyone to know and trust the Father. He would need to bring us to the Father by a great work of intercession—that is, intervening to change the course and destiny of our lives.

The intercession of Jesus

Before his death, Jesus prayed a special prayer which was all about revealing the name of his Father. He spoke about what he had done and would do to bring us to the Father. This prayer is vital for us because we live inside of his praying. He not only prayed, but he acted as well, and he continues to pray for us in the same way. It is because he has done and still does this that we can live as children of God.

John 17:6, 26; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 9:24

Jesus had revealed the name of his Father by his life and teaching. He said, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). Now, he asked his Father to keep us in that name. A name is a revelation of a person and enables us to approach them.

John 17:6, 11

Jesus had given his disciples the word of his Father so they would be sanctified or set apart for him. The teaching of Jesus is wonderful to hear and his miracles are amazing to see, but in these things, the Father has spoken to us. By speaking to us, he sets us apart to be his children.

John 17:14, 17

Jesus set himself apart for the Father's special work. He bore our sins on the cross. Then, he rose again. Because of this, we are set apart for the Father. All of this is the Father's word to us and we need to 'stay with it'. Jesus prayed that this would be so. This is the way we remain in the Father and the Son.

John 17:19

Jesus prayed that we would be 'in' him and 'in' the Father, just as he and the Father were 'in' each other. This is not meant to be mystical. We can be in the Father because he makes room for us there. It is a way of speaking about an intimate relationship. Jesus has given to us the glory the Father gave to him so we would be one people in God, loved by the Father just as the Son was loved by the Father. So, he has revealed the name of his Father so that the love of the Father, and he himself, would be in his followers.

John 17:21, 23, 26

Let us all believe this word of the Father! Experiences of life may have taught us to shut out what others do and we may also have excluded the Father who has spoken to us by his Son.

Jesus entered into our lonely, isolated world where all manner of bitterness and self-pity, craving and rage may have developed. He has taken all this with him before the Holy Father on the cross and suffered its shame and blame. The Father, through his obedient Son, has revealed his love for all his children. More than that, he has given his love and his own Son to live in us. We need to make room for them!

Then trust this love of the Father in the Son! By this, we are kept in the Father's name and, together with Jesus Christ, can say 'Father!' All our poverty of spirit has then found its resting place. All our mourning has found its true comfort. All our vulnerability has found its true trust. All our longing for righteousness will be satisfied. We can explore the riches of our Father's loving, for ourselves, and for the world.

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