

Abba's Child

By Greg Ogden

Chapter 15 of Discipleship Essentials

Do you know who you are? Do you know who you were designed to be? Do you know the Father's intent for your life? You are meant to hear in your spirit the same thing Jesus heard when he came out of the waters of baptism at the beginning of his ministry: "You are my Son, who I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

Romans 8:15-16 attests to the highest privilege of the Christian life and the deepest longing of our hearts: knowing God as our perfect Father. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the spirit of sonship (adoption). And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

J.I. Packer puts it simply. "What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God for his Father." In other words, we are designed to live in a family. Our highest privilege and deepest need is to experience the holy God as our loving father, to approach him without fear and to be assured of his fatherly care and concern.

God and Our Earthly Fathers

It has been observed that our first impressions of God are derived from the model of our parents. Our ability to trust God, to become intimate and self-revealing with him comes from the model for good or for ill that we have in our parents.

Corrie ten Boom, the great Dutch Christian, tells how she learned to trust God when she was in a German concentration camp because of the model of her father. As a child she would call out in the evening, "Papa, I'm ready for bed." Her father would come to her room and pray for her before she went to sleep. He would then place his hand gently on her face and say, "Sleep well, Corrie. I love you." She would remain very still because she wanted to feel the touch of his hand as she fell asleep. Years later in the concentration camp she remembered the feel of her father's hand on her face. When lying on a wretched, dirty mattress she would say, "O Lord, let me feel Your hand upon me."

Some argue that if we had an inadequate human father who lacked wisdom or the ability to show affection, or who abandoned or abused us, we can't see God as a loving Father. But the good news is that our relationship with God as Father is not limited to our experience with our parents. God is a Father who is faithful in love and care, generous and thoughtful, interested in all we do, skillful in training, wise in guidance, always available, helpful in teaching us maturity and integrity—no matter what our earthly fathers were like.

Our Dad

Scripture teaches that our Father can be the same one Jesus had. Paul tells us that the indwelling Holy Spirit causes us to cry out, "Abba, Father," words spoken by Jesus. In the garden of Gethsemane just hours before his crucifixion, Jesus poured out his soul to his Father. Mark tells us that Jesus threw himself to the ground not far from his dozing disciples. In evident pain he cried out, "Abba,

Father...Take this cup from me (the cup of his sacrificial death). Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). What is unusual here is the way Jesus addresses God. Abba is an Aramaic word that expresses an intimate family relationship, a word used by a completely trusting and dependent child wholly secure in the loving arms of a father. "Dearest Father" is an equivalent expression in English. Old Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias thoroughly searched literature leading up to New Testament times to see if anyone had dared address God in such a familiar terms, and he found no previous usage. It would have been scandalous to address the Holy One this way, the One whose name was so sacred that it was not even spoken, yet Jesus was on a first-name basis with the God of the universe.

How did the Father feel about his Son? At the beginning of his public ministry Jesus presented himself for baptism to John the Baptist. As Jesus came out of the water, a dove representing the Holy Spirit descended on him and a voice spoke from the heavens. Matthew records this as an announcement of God's pleasure with his Son: This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Mark records the message as a more personal statement from Father to Son: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

Every parent knows on a human level what the great God of the universe felt toward his eternal Son. When our daughter went to college, my wife and I certainly had heightened feelings of pride and protection. As we walked back to the care to leave her in her new environment, I wanted to turn to the campus and say, "Do you know who I have delivered here? The most precious person in my life." The Father knew the danger into which he was sending his Son. He knew that his life would end in torture on the cross and that when faced with the separation that the cross would bring, Jesus needed to know that his Father took pleasure, delight and pride in him.

Adopted Children of God

When the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our lives, we too can cry, "Abba, Father." The same Spirit that proceeds from the relationship between the Father and the Son is implanted in us. The difference between us and Jesus is that he is the natural Son of the Father, whereas we are adopted into the family through his sacrifice.

We are all spiritual orphans. Our religious and sinful nature cut us off from the Father. The Bible says quite clearly we are not born children of God and therefore must go through an adoption process. The price of our adoption was the death of God's Son. C.S. Lewis wrote, "The Son of God became a man to enable men to become the sons of God."

The good news is that when we recognize that we are spiritual orphans in need of the Father, we can go through the Son. When we acknowledge that our sin has severed the relationship with the Father, that Jesus is the gracious payment for our sin and then accept the gift of forgiveness offered by inviting the Spirit of Jesus into our life, then we can cry, "Abba, Father." We are at home at last, welcomed into God's family.

As adopted children we can enjoy the same favor that Jesus has with the Father. We too are the apple of God's eye, the pleasure of his love the delight of his focus. And if we didn't get all that we wanted or needed in our human fathers, we are invited even more deeply into the pleasure that the Father of heaven and earth takes in his Son, and us. We have been included in the family and hear the

Father say, “You are my child whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” We now have the Father we always needed and wanted.

Our Rich Inheritance

But that’s not where the text ends. If we are full-fledged members of the family, there is an inheritance waiting for us. “If we are children, then we are heirs---heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). We have been included in the will and stand to inherit such things as resurrection bodies that do not decay, and a new heaven and new earth, for starters. The will also mentions that we’ll have a family to spend eternity with, in a life free of pain, crying, disease and death. But that’s still not the best part. The best part is that we are heirs of God. The will reads: “I, God, bequeath myself to you for all eternity.”

We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, and therefore we get in on all that Jesus inherits. When Jesus was in the upper room before going to the cross, he longed to return to the presence of his Father. He prayed in John 17:5, “Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”

Jesus was looking forward to the joy on the other side of the cross. The writer of Hebrews says that “for the joy set before him (Jesus) endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). As co-heirs with Jesus we get to share in the glory that the Father bestows on the Son. As Jesus prayed moments before his arrest, he made our inheritance with him plain: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given because you loved me before the creation of the world”(John 17:24). Jesus wraps up his prayer by asking the Father to bestow on us the same love that he has for Jesus: “I have made you known to them...in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them” (v.26).

We are drawn into the family circle and get to enjoy the spillover of the Father’s love for the Son. As we bring this section on the message of Christ to a close, we end where we started. We began examining the meaning of being created in the image of God and discovered that this meant we were created for relationship. To be adopted into God’s family is to be restored to paradise lost. God sent Jesus as the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15) to restore the image of God in us. We find our way home only when the Holy Spirit comes to take residence in us and we cry out, “Abba, Father.” Welcome home!

Small Group Questions:

1. What is the fundamental definition of what a Christian is?
2. What points stood out to you in the discussion of our concept of God coming from our parents?
3. What does being able to call God Abba and Father convey about the nature of our relationship with him?
4. The Father has the same view of us as he has of his Son, since we are his adopted children. Is it difficult for you to believe that God takes pleasure in, is proud of and delights in you? Why or why not?
5. What does Paul mean when he calls us “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ?”

6. How does this study on adoption bring us full circle to what it means to be created in the image of God?
7. In what accomplishments or failures in life are you most tempted to find your identity?
8. In what ways do you feel pressure to create or maintain your sense of self?

Through the Gospel our identity is received not achieved.