

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Biblical Fathers: Your heavenly Father

As a young child, two of my favourite story books were 'The Bear Scout' and 'The Bike Ride' - stories that showed a hapless father bear trying to teach his boy all that he would need to know. His method was clearly in the "do the opposite of what I do and you will be OK" school. They really made me laugh, and I could do so secure in the knowledge that I had a really great earthly father and a perfect Heavenly Father.

This morning we are going to start a new series on 'Biblical fathers'. This week and next week we shall look at the way in which the idea of God's fatherhood is developed throughout the Bible. As the perfect example, He must always be the One that we look to as our pattern. As is so often the case, what God does perfectly, the devil will try to counterfeit, with terrible consequences. This will be the subject of our third talk in the series. We will then conclude the series by looking at applying what we have learnt to our own practice of being fathers, whether to our own children or within the church. Now that the Easter cards have been removed from the shelves, and Father's Day cards take their place, this series is a timely reminder that this world really needs fathers to be the men they ought to be. This world also needs to understand what the Fatherhood of God is all about.

The first thing we need to realise with all human relationships is that they are given to us as copies of a heavenly reality. Whether we are considering fatherhood, as we are today, or husbands and wives etc. the heavenly relationship came first. God then instituted human relationships to help us to understand heavenly realities. So it was not a case that God saw that men and women had decided to get married and live together in families and thought to Himself, "That is a good idea!" and so inspired Paul to use that picture to describe the kind of love that Christ has for the church (see Ephesians 5:25). No, that is putting the cart before the horse. Much rather, Christ loved the church from before the foundation of the world, with an eternal, unconditional for-always love, and the only possible way that we could try and begin to understand what that sort of love is like was for God to bring a man and a woman together in a marriage bond, so that we could live out what is true. No wonder husbands are to love their wives! (see Ephesians 5:25).

So to fatherhood. God was and is an eternal Father to an eternal Son. Long before creation, Father and Son existed in perfect harmony. Proverbs 8:22-31 give a beautiful insight into the relationship that existed in an eternity past, long before sin could work its havoc. Later God would reveal Himself as a Father to mankind in general, and to Israel in particular, as we shall see later this morning. In giving instruction to men to be fathers, rather than abandoning both mother and child, as is so often the case in the animal kingdom, He desires that we men serve as an object lesson to the heavenly reality that is His fatherhood.

When we see it in that light we begin to realise that fatherhood is a hugely high calling. It has nothing to do with passing one's DNA on to future generations, or carrying on the family name, but of helping this world to see who God is.

Before we begin to look at what the Bible has to say about what it is to be a father, it is just worth making two general points.

1. Whilst in English today, the word 'father' is almost exclusively now male gendered, certainly in New Testament Greek this was not the case. Context would decide whether it would be specifically male or more akin to the gender neutral 'parent' in today's English. So as we speak of fatherhood in this series we are not just thinking about half the population, for God made males and females in His image. But neither do we need to pursue the nonsense of speaking about the motherhood of God, because the Bible never does. Distinctions that the Bible does not make are best avoided.
2. In Hebrew, the word father is "ab", the simplest sound the youngest child can make. It is a noise even my young granddaughter can make, even though she is distinctly English! To my mind, the point that God is making is that even though the fact that He is the Father and has revealed Himself in this way and that this is incredibly amazing and way beyond our ability to fully comprehend, yet He has done so in such a simple way that even the youngest child can in some way articulate.

So let us begin our study of fatherhood by looking at our heavenly Father, and first of all seeing what it is to be a father. We will look at four words beginning with the letter "P" that will give us a clear idea of what is meant as God reveals Himself as Father, before looking at three distinct threads to His Fatherhood. Before looking at the first of these "P" words, as I was chatting to my wife about what she thought it was to be a father, her answer was "Well, it goes with mother, doesn't it?" One cannot have one without the other, and the two are necessary to make a perfect whole. I would just make a practical point at this stage to any young dads listening this morning, that if you worry about what it takes to be a father, and how you will manage, my advice would be you will not go too far wrong if you love the mother of your children the way a man should. All the rest will fall in to place, and find its way so long as the foundation is secure.

Progenitor

So let us start by considering a father as a Progenitor:

- *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth", Genesis 1:1*
- *"Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth'", Genesis 1:26.*
- *"But now, O LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay and You are the Potter; and all we are the work of Your hand", Isaiah 64:8*

Each one of us starts with an act of His will, for He has formed us and given us life, a life that He sustains, until the moment of His allowing. And note too in Genesis 1:26, that His creation was purposeful. He had a role in mind for mankind as He created us. It really worries me when I hear well intentioned parents wanting to allow their children to grow up in a vacuum to be the person that they turn out to be. As a father, there ought to be a purpose to my bringing children into the world.

Provider

- *"And God said, 'See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food", Genesis 1:29.*
- *"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning", James 1:17.*

Part of the role of father that we see perfectly fulfilled in God is that He has provided for us all that we need and that is good and perfect. Too often, we may provide for our children but in doing so we spoil them or frustrate them. Not so God! In His provision we have all that we need. With the realisation of this comes true peace and contentment in life. God has given me everything that is good for me, so if I don't have it then it is not good for me to have right now, or may never be.

Protector

- *"A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy habitation. God sets the solitary in families; He brings out those who are bound into prosperity; but the rebellious dwell in a dry land", Psalm 68:5-6.*
- *"As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust", Psalm 103:13-14.*

A consistent theme throughout the Bible is that of the way God protects the most vulnerable in society. He knows us through and through and does not allow us to go through circumstances that are beyond His ability to sustain us in. We see His physical protection of the Israelites at the Red Sea (see Exodus 14:1-21). We see His moral protection of Lot in dragging him out of Sodom (see Genesis 19:1-29). We see His emotional protection of Elijah in the cave as the prophet lay down to die (see 1 Kings 19). All these aspects underpin the all encompassing protection that lies at the heart of fatherhood.

Pattern

- *"Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it'", Isaiah 30:21.*
- We see a similar concern in the life of Jesus as he acted in loco parentis to the disciples - *"he that has seen Me has seen the Father", John 14:9.*

It was also a theme taken up by the Apostle Paul as he urged those to whom he wrote to, to be *"imitators of [him], as [he was] of Christ"* (1 Corinthians 11:1) as he expressed his spiritual fatherly concern for the young believers.

An integral part of fatherhood lies in showing by our actions what a child should be as it grows up. In our dealings within the family, with society at large, with those who offend us we are to provide the template for behaviour that our children can easily follow.

Now that we have a reasonably clear idea of what lies behind the fatherhood of God, let us spend the rest of our time this morning considering the ways in which this fatherhood is expressed in the Old Testament up until the coming of the Lord Jesus.

Frequent reference is made to God as the Father of the nation of Israel. The godly Jew would never have viewed God as his or her own Father on an individual basis, but time and again the prophets in particular called the Israelites as a nation to return to God as their Father.

- *"They shall come with weeping, and with supplications I will lead them. I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters, In a straight way in which they will not stumble; for I am a Father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn"*, Jeremiah 31:9.
- *"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me; the ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, My people do not consider"*, Isaiah 1:2-3.
- *"Where are Your zeal and Your strength, the yearning of Your heart and Your mercies toward me? Are they restrained? Doubtless You are our Father, though Abraham was ignorant of us, and Israel does not acknowledge us. You, O LORD, are our Father; our Redeemer from everlasting is Your name"*, Isaiah 63:15-16.

The Jews would look back to Abraham or Jacob as the father of the nation, though after so many years of history, neither would recognise the nation that had sprung from them. Isaiah correctly identifies God as the true father of the nation, the One who would be their true Saviour. Hence the message to Pharaoh, that Moses was to deliver: *"Thus says the LORD: Israel is My son, My firstborn"*, (Exodus 4:22). Israel recognised the great blessing there was in knowing that God was the Father of their nation. And yet with great blessing comes great responsibility. Malachi in particular highlights this:

- *"A son honours his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honour? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence?" says the LORD of hosts*, Malachi 1:6.
- *"Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another by profaning the covenant of the fathers?"*, Malachi 2:10.

As the Father of the nation, God was due reverence and obedience from His children. As God was the father of all men, so Israel had a responsibility to treat others as His children two messages that were as important today as they were in the 5th century before Jesus came. As we in the west of Europe seem to be embarked upon a path of increasing intolerance towards others, let us not become guilty of disrespecting the children of our One Father!

However, wonderful though the revelation of God as the father of Israel in particular and mankind in general was, it fell well short of the fullest revelation of God's fatherhood that has been brought to light, and indeed could only be brought to light, once redemption was complete. This will be the subject that will be more fully developed next week. Suffice to read together now from Galatians 4:1-5: *"Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons."*

The adoption of men and women as sons demanded our redemption, and only once that price was paid by God's One and Only Son could we as individuals ever be brought into the position of addressing God as Father. Israel remained, and indeed still remains in their hearts and minds, under the tutelage of a guardian - the law. But all that was about to change with the coming of the Lord Jesus, for them and for us also.

Conclusion

We shall conclude this morning by considering the Lord's own words in Matthew 6:9 and Mathew 6:32 to make one final, but vitally important point:

- *“In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your Name”, Matthew 6:9*
- *“For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” Matthew 6:32*

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1-4), He prefaced His prayer by the words *“when you pray”* (Luke 1:2) before addressing God as *“Our Father”* (Luke 1:2). Similarly by the end of the chapter, He refers to *“Your heavenly Father”* (Luke 11:13). There was a clear distinction in the mind of the Lord Jesus between the relationship that He perfectly enjoyed with His Father, and that that his disciples would enjoy with the Father. He never associated Himself with His followers in addressing God jointly as *“Our Father”*. I think it is really important to remember this as we live in a far less deferential society. Wonderful though it is to be able to address God as Father, and wonderful though it was that God revealed Himself to Israel as the Father of the nation, our sonship does not make us equal to the Lord Jesus. He was and is the Only begotten Son and stands in relation to His Father in a totally unique way. It has been well said that we should never forget that God is our Father, nor that our Father is God. A healthy reverential fear is always in order as we approach God, particularly in our public prayer and worship of Him.

But what a wonderful thing it was that the One true Son of the Father could teach His disciples to address God as Father. As godly Jews, those disciples would have been well used to addressing God as the God of heaven and earth, so far and distant that they dare not write or say His name in full. But as the Son, Jesus had the authority to speak about the wonderful relationship that was about to be entered into fully. God willing, next week it is the fullness of this relationship that we, as members of the church, have been brought into that we shall explore together.

Hopefully, this morning, like me you will have felt the challenge that awaits each one of us as we try to put into practice the qualities of God’s fatherhood. It would be a wonderful thing if, without us speaking a word, those we come into contact with each day could learn what it means to know God as the Father of all because of the way that we behave. Hopefully, too, you will have a sense in your hearts of the truly incredible truth that the Bible teaches that God is our heavenly Father. As people and civilisations of old could approach angry gods fearing their wrath, hoping that some offering, even of human sacrifice, would appease them, and cause them to be favourably disposed towards them, all the time God has revealed Himself to be quite the opposite. It has always been His deepest desire to draw close to mankind, and to enter into the closest of relationships with him. The reason that even today a new dad will get a real thrill when his own child first learns to say *“dada”* is because that sentiment is still felt in the heart of the Almighty God, who loves to be called Father by His children.

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