

“Our Father”

“Father” will bring a variety of pictures to mind, some very personal and some received from the broader culture, some favorable and some unfavorable, even painful.

Before looking in a focused way at the text itself, it might be worth reflecting upon what we ourselves bring to the text.

- What kinds of pictures of fathers are promoted in contemporary culture? In the media? In the church?
- What qualities is the ideal father supposed to possess?
- What are considered to be negative things that fathers are supposed to avoid?
- What would it mean to fail at being father? What kinds of things are we most afraid of?

Pictures of Fathers in the Bible (And What We Can Learn from These About the Fatherhood of God)

Fathers invite children into the family.

- This is often cast in language of adoption, but is not limited to that.
 - To understand the significance of adoption, reflect on the experience of Mephibosheth in 2 Sam. 4:4; 9:1-11.
- God creates relationships by bringing people together into his family.
 - Ps. 68:5-6a: “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the solitary in a home.”
 - Where there is one father, there is one family.
 - See initially Mt. 23:9; Mt. 12:50 pp. Mk. 3:35 (pp. Lk. 8:21).
 - This is later developed as a major theme of Ephesians (Eph. 3:14-15; 4:3-6).
- God brings the people of Israel together and makes Israel his favored son and says that he will be a father to them.
 - Ex. 4:22-23a: “then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord, Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.”’”
 - Dt. 14:1,3: “You are the sons of the Lord your God...For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession out of all the peoples on the face of the earth.”
 - Dt. 32:6b: “Is not he [sc. the Lord] your father, who created you, who made you and established you?”
 - Is. 63:16b: “You, O Lord, are our Father.”
 - Is. 64:8: “But now, O Lord, you are our Father.”
 - Mal. 2:10: “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?”
- When God comes to us in Jesus Christ, he sets our past disobedience aside and makes us his sons and daughters, with all the powers, position and privileges that belong to a son or daughter.
 - 2 Cor. 6:18 (quoting Ezek. 20:34; 2 Sam. 7:14; Is. 43:6): “I will welcome you...I will be a father to you...you shall be sons and daughters to me.”

- Eph. 1:4b-5a: “In love, he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ.”
- Gal. 3:26: “for in Jesus Christ you are all sons of God through faith”
- Jn. 1:12-13: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”
- 1 Jn. 3:1-2: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called children of God; and so we are. Beloved, we are God’s children now”
- Rom. 8:14-17a: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.”
- Gal. 4:4-7: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”
- 1 Jn. 2:13b: “I write to you, children, because you know the Father”

To be a father is to make oneself vulnerable to the evils that grip one’s children and are done by one’s children.

- The word “compassion,” which we often use quite freely and easily, actually means to *suffer with* another person because of our relation to them and this gives us a realistic picture of the actual cost of love.
 - Love creates lasting relationships, which cost and hurt.
 - By contrast, a person who never really loves (or never loves anyone else in a way that rises above superficial self-interest) might have a relatively serene and untroubled life and never have to suffer in this way. A life of that kind would also not have any depth or lasting value, so avoiding pain can never be the guiding principle of a truly good life.
- Christian parenting materials today often seem to assume that we can successfully root out our children’s evils, so that through good parenting we will get to a point where neither children nor parents are hurt by these evils anymore.
 - Scripture seems to teach the opposite, namely, that in a world where sin is a real and dangerous power that regularly tempts and afflicts us, our children will sin against us and will disappoint us and hurt us. This is the cost of love.
 - The hurt and grief which parents experience when children wrong them is emphasized in the book of Proverbs:
 - Prov. 17:21,25: “He who sires a fool gets himself sorrow, and father of a fool has no joy...A foolish son is a grief to his father and bitterness to her who bore him.”
 - Prov. 19:13a: “A foolish son is a ruin to his father.”
 - Jesus gives us an even more powerful picture of this truth when he describes the father of the prodigal son in Lk. 15:11-32. He also shows us here a way beyond defensive self-protection and back to a better love.
 - “the father (Jesus’ most developed image of God) is not sitting at home brooding about the ‘mistake’ of financing his younger son’s follies, but standing at the doorway, scanning the road by which the

boy may come back; running to embrace him, silencing his apologies, calling a party to celebrate his own joy” (*SacredSpace: The Prayer Book 2010*, p. 298=Kindle location 2678-2680)

To be a father is to continue to care and to act for a child’s good, even in the face of wrongs done by the child.

- Hos. 11:1-4: “When Israel was a child, I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bonds of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.”
- Jer. 3:19-20; 31:9: “I said, How I would set you among my sons, and give you a pleasant land, a heritage most beautiful of all nations. And I thought you would call me Father, and would not turn from following me. Surely as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so you have been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the Lord... with weeping they shall come, and with pleas for mercy, I will lead them back, I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble, for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.
- In Ps. 103, vv. 11-12 describe God as freely granting forgiveness to those who have wronged him and concludes (v.13) with the words, “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.”
- Dt. 1:31: “...in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place.”
- Mt. 7:9-11 (pp. Lk. 11:11-13): “Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to you children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”
- 2 Cor. 1:3-4a: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction.

Fathers intercede for (are advocates for) their children—that they might know God and not be held by sin or oppressed by the Devil or any other power of evil.

- *that they might know God and have peace with God*
 - In 1 Chron. 29:19a, David prays, “Grant to Solomon my son a whole heart that he may keep your commandments...”
- *that they might no longer be oppressed by the sickness which afflicts them*
 - Cf. David’s intercession for his son in 2 Sam. 12:15-16
 - See also Jn. 4:46-49, where the royal official intercedes for his son.
- *that they might no longer be oppressed by the sin which presently holds them and has power over them*
 - Job 1:5: Job “would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all [i.e., all his children]. For Job said, ‘It may be that my children have sinned and cursed God in their heart.’ Thus Job did continually.”
- *that they might no longer be oppressed by the powers of evil*

- Cf. the intercession made by the father of the boy oppressed by an evil spirit in Mt. 17:14-15 pp. Mk. 9:17-18 pp. Lk. 9:38-39.

A father has an enduring commitment to guide and teach his children.

- See esp. Ps. 78:2-8 and Ex. 12:26-27 (the institution of the Passover).
- This theme is especially emphasized in Deuteronomy (Dt. 4:9; 6:6-7,20-24; 11:18-21; 31:13) and Proverbs (Prov. 1:8-9; 13:1; 22:6) and reaffirmed in the New Testament (Eph. 6:4).

If all these things are so, let us pray not as orphans, but with confidence as sons and daughters. (Time permitting, read the excerpts from Bilquis Sheikh in Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Called from Islam to Christ*, 198-205 and invite reflection on her story of her life.)