

OUR FATHER

God is called many things in the Bible. He is of course the Creator,¹ but He is also described as a Judge,² a King,³ a Shepherd,⁴ and a Friend.⁵ The prophets Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel even compare God to a husband with an unfaithful wife.⁶ The most common name for God in the Old Testament is probably “Jehovah,” which is usually translated as “Lord.”⁷ But in the New Testament another name for God becomes prominent: Father.⁸

The New Testament writers often refer to God as the Father of Jesus Christ.⁹ God is also simply called, “Father,”¹⁰ or “the Father.”¹¹ But more important for our purposes are the many New Testament references to God as **our** Father,¹² and to us as His children.¹³ For example, Jesus says:

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”¹⁴

Here is another example from one of John’s letters:

See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and *such* we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.¹⁵

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he uses similar language:

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.¹⁶

Why does God ¹⁷ repeatedly use this analogy of parent-child to illustrate His relationship with us? ¹⁸ Why didn't He instead emphasize one of the many other possibilities, such as husband-wife, friends, siblings, employer-employee, or master-slave? I am convinced that God did so because of the peculiar nature of the parent-child relationship, which is like no other in human society.

When we think of the qualities of a good parent, what comes to mind? Certainly, a good parent protects and provides for her children. And so does God. ¹⁹ Also, a good parent teaches and disciplines a child. God does the same. ²⁰ But most of all, a good parent loves his children unconditionally. And that is the key. In no other human relationship is love so unselfish and so completely unconditional as a parent's love for her children. God, who is perfect, ²¹ is also the perfect Parent; He radiates this unconditional love. One of Jesus' most famous parables illustrates this.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, ²² a young man requests and receives his share of his father's wealth while the father is still alive. He then leaves home, and wastes the money on immoral pleasures. Having then run out of money, the young man begins to starve, and eventually decides to return home to seek forgiveness. But before the boy can even finish getting the words out, his father has already pardoned him and begun to celebrate the son's homecoming. The father's behavior is a wonderful illustration of *agapaô*, the Greek word for selfless, self-giving, self-sacrificing love. ²³ This is love which gives, expecting nothing in return. This is love that always sees value in the person loved. This is the love a parent has for her children. And this is the love that God has for us.

When we view God as a loving parent, the New Testament comes into sharper focus. God is not (as in almost all other religions) merely a judge, hunting for a reason to condemn us, or impartially weighing our deeds on the scales of justice to see whether or not we deserve to go to Heaven. ²⁴ He is instead a loving Father. We cannot earn His love through obedience or accomplishments or any manner of genuflection—*because we already have it*.

This is not to say that God approves of our bad behavior. He does not. Indeed, this is yet another parallel between our relationship with God and that of a child with her parents. As a child grows, her increasing desire for self-determination collides with her parents' efforts to instill proper values and to protect her from harmful choices. To the extent that she resists these efforts and insists on acting as she desires, she will alienate herself from her parents—a situation that often becomes most acute during the

teenage years. Similarly, our selfish choices, inconsiderate conduct, and immorality estrange us from God.

Nevertheless, like any good parent, God continues to love us, and is eager to forgive us. Yet we cannot *earn* His forgiveness through our own efforts, any more than a child can earn his parents' forgiveness by being good. Good deeds cannot cancel bad deeds. Instead, we receive forgiveness from our parents simply by asking for it. And the same is true of God's mercy. We are saved by God's grace: ²⁵

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. ²⁶

Obedience—which is so fundamental in most religions—is very much secondary in Christianity, because God is far more interested in our hearts than in our actions. So we do not find forgiveness through any good deeds, but through repentance—i.e., sorrow or regret for past wrongs, combined with a desire to change. ²⁷ That desire to change leads us back to God, to whom we must surrender our very lives. ²⁸ In doing so, we tear down the barriers to relationship with Him. When we finally surrender to Him, we are obeying the greatest commandment:

“ ‘HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD;
AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH
ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND
WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR
STRENGTH.’ ” ²⁹

“Love” in this verse, as in most of the New Testament, is the Greek word, *agapaô*. As we have seen, this is the love that God has for us. This kind of love is not a feeling, but a choice. We are to “love” God by choosing to follow Him, and by making Him more important than anyone or anything else in our lives. In this way, we will establish a loving relationship with Him.

God's unconditional love for us also means that God is a God of second chances—and third, fourth, and fifth chances, too. Like the father in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, God anxiously waits to reestablish the connection with each of us, as soon as we turn back to Him. So no matter how far we've fallen, or how bad we've been, or for how long, "our Father" stands ready to forgive His children. All we have to do is ask Him.

Endnotes:

¹ See Genesis chapters 1-2. See also Ecclesiastes 12:1, Isaiah 27:11, 40:28, 43:1, 43:15; Romans 1:25; and 1 Peter 4:19.

² See Genesis 18:25; Judges 11:27; Job 23:7; Psalms 7:11, 50:6, 75:7, 94:2; Isaiah 33:22; 2 Timothy 4:8; Hebrews 12:23; and James 5:9. Many other verses, too numerous to list, speak of God judging people. See, for example, 1 Samuel 2:10; 1 Chronicles 16:33; and Psalms 9:8, 67:4, 96:10.

³ See Psalms 5:2, 10:16, 24:7-10, 29:10, 44:4, 47:2, 47:6-7, 68:24, 84:3, 95:3, 98:6, 145:1, 149:2; Isaiah 6:5, 33:22, 41:21, 43:15, 44:6; Jeremiah 8:19, 10:7, 10:10, 46:18, 48:15, 51:57; Daniel 4:37; Zephaniah 3:15; Zechariah 14:9, 14:16-17; Malachi 1:14; Matthew 2:2, 25:34, 25:40; 1 Timothy 1:17, 6:15; Revelation 15:3, 17:14, 19:16. (And see Zechariah 9:9, Matthew 21:5, and John 12:15.)

⁴ See Genesis 49:24; Psalms 23:1, 28:9, 80:1; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10; Ezekiel 34:12; Matthew 26:31 (quoting Zechariah 13:7); Mark 14:27; John 10:11-14; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25, 5:4; Revelation 7:17.

⁵ See 2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; Jeremiah 3:4; John 15:13-15.

⁶ The wife is, of course, the people of Israel and Judah, who were unfaithful to God. See Hosea 1:2, 2:2, 2:5-8, 2:10, 2:13; Jeremiah 3:1-2, 31:31-32; and Ezekiel 16:15-32. God is also compared to a husband in Isaiah 54:5-6, 2 Corinthians 11:2, and Revelation 21:2.

⁷ According to *Strong's Greek-Hebrew Dictionary* (in *Bible Explorer 4* software), the word "Jehovah" is used more than 6,000 times in the Bible. In Genesis alone, God is referred to as "Jehovah," or "Lord," in 148 different verses. See Genesis 2:4-5, 2:7-9, 2:15-16, 2:18-19, 2:21-22, 3:1, 3:8-9, 3:13-14, 3:21-23, 4:1, 4:3-4, 4:6, 4:9, 4:13, 4:15-16, 4:26, 5:29, 6:3, 6:5-8, 7:1, 7:5, 7:16, 8:20-21, 9:26, 10:9, 11:5-6, 11:8-9, 12:1, 12:4, 12:7-8, 12:17, 13:4, 13:10, 13:13-14, 13:18, 14:22, 15:1-2, 15:4, 15:6-8, 15:18, 16:2, 16:5, 16:7, 16:9-11, 16:13, 17:1, 18:1, 18:13-14, 18:17, 18:19-20, 18:22, 18:26-27, 18:30-33, 19:13-14, 19:16, 19:24, 19:27, 20:4, 20:18, 21:1, 21:33, 22:11, 22:14-16, 24:1, 24:3, 24:7, 24:12, 24:21, 24:26-27, 24:31, 24:35, 24:40, 24:42, 24:44, 24:48, 24:50-52, 24:56, 25:21-23, 26:2, 26:12, 26:22, 26:24-25, 26:28-29, 27:7, 27:20, 27:27, 28:13, 28:16, 28:21, 29:31-33, 29:35, 30:24, 30:27, 30:30, 31:3, 31:49, 32:9, 38:7, 38:10, 39:2-3, 39:5, 39:21, 39:23, 49:18.

⁸ Only one book of the New Testament—the very short 3rd letter of John—fails to refer to God as Father. God is also sometimes represented as a Father in the Old Testament. See, for example: Deuteronomy 32:6; Psalms 68:5; Isaiah 9:6, 63:16, 64:8; Jeremiah 3:4, 3:19, 31:9.

⁹ See Matthew 7:21, 10:32-33, 11:25-27, 12:50, 15:13, 16:17, 16:27, 18:10, 18:19, 18:35, 20:23, 25:31-34, 26:39, 26:42, 26:53; Mark 8:38; Luke 10:21-22, 22:28-30, 24:49; John 5:17, 5:18, 6:32, 6:40, 8:19, 8:38, 8:49, 8:54, 10:18, 10:29-30, 10:37, 14:7, 14:20-21, 14:23, 15:1, 15:8, 15:15, 15:23-24, 20:17; Romans 15:6; 2 Corinthians 1:3, 11:31; Ephesians 1:3; Colossians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3; 2 Peter 1:17; 1 John 1:3, 1 John 2:22-24, 4:14; 2 John 1:3, 1:9; Revelation 1:6, 2:27, 3:5, 3:21, 14:1.

¹⁰ See Mark 14:36; Luke 22:41-42, Luke 23:34, 23:46; John 8:41-42, 11:41, 12:28, 17:1, 17:5, 17:11, 17:21, 17:24-25; Ephesians 4:6; Hebrews 1:5, 2:11.

¹¹ See Matthew 24:36, 28:19; Mark 13:32; Luke 9:26; John 1:14, 1:18, 3:35, 4:21-23, 5:19-23, 5:26, 5:36-37, 5:45, 6:27, 6:37, 6:44-46, 6:57, 6:65, 8:16, 8:18, 8:27-28, 10:15, 10:17, 10:32, 10:36, 10:38, 12:26, 12:49-50, 13:1, 13:3, 14:6, 14:8-13, 14:16, 14:26, 14:28, 14:31, 15:9, 15:16, 15:26, 16:3, 16:10, 16:15, 16:17, 16:23, 16:25-28, 16:32, 18:11, 20:21; Acts 1:4, 1:7, 2:33; Romans 6:4; 1 Corinthians 8:6, 15:24; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:17, 2:18, 3:14, 5:20, 6:23; Philippians 2:11; Colossians 1:12, 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; James 1:17; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 John 1:2, 2:1, 2:13, 2:15-16; 2 John 1:4; Jude 1:1.

¹² See Matthew 5:16, 5:44-45, 5:48, 6:1, 6:3-4, 6:6, 6:8, 6:9, 6:14-15, 6:17-18, 6:26, 6:32, 7:11, 10:20, 10:29, 13:43, 18:14, 23:9; Mark 11:25-26; Luke 6:36, 11:13, 12:30, 12:32, 20:17, Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2, 6:18; Galatians 1:3-4; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2, 4:20; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 3:11, 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:1, 2:16; Philemon 1:3; James 1:27, 3:9.

¹³ John 1:12, 11:52; Acts 17:28-29; Romans 8:15-17, 8:21, 9:8; 2 Corinthians 6:18; Galatians 4:4-7; Philippians 2:15; Hebrews 12:7-10; 1 Peter 1:14; 1 John 3:1-2, 3:10, 5:1, 5:2.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:44-45 (all Biblical quotations herein are from the *New American Standard* translation.)

¹⁵ 1 John 3:1-2

¹⁶ Romans 8:15-17

¹⁷ Whether you believe that the New Testament writings were penned by God through the hand of men, or by men under God's inspiration, or were simply written by men with a deep understanding of God and His ways, I believe the result is the same: God was the ultimate source of those writings.

¹⁸ Of the New Testament books, only the 3rd letter of John contains no reference to God as Father.

¹⁹ See Genesis 1:29-30, 9:2-3; Exodus 16:2-18, 16:35, 17:1-6, 23:20; Numbers 11:4-6, 11:31-32, 20:2-11; Deuteronomy 8:7-10; Ruth 1:6; 1 Kings 17:2-16; Job 36:31; Psalms 12:5-7, 32:7, 36:6-7, 40:11, 61:2-4, 78:24-29, 91:11, 104:10-15, 104:27-28, 121:2-8; Isaiah 52:12; Daniel 12:1.

²⁰ See Hebrews 12:4-11:

You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES." It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? But if

you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us* for *our* good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

See also, Deuteronomy 4:36, 8:5, 11:2; Proverbs 3:11-12; Revelation 3:19.

²¹ See Matthew 5:48.

²² Luke 15:11-32

²³ When you see the English word “love” in the New Testament, the original Greek is always either *agapaô* (or a derivation thereof) or *phileô* (or a derivation thereof). The latter refers to brotherly love (as in Philadelphia, “City of Brotherly Love”), and is used in the following verses: Matthew 6:5, 10:37, 23:6; Luke 20:46; John 5:20, 11:3, 11:36, 12:25, 15:19, 16:27, 20:2, 21:15-17; Romans 12:10; 1 Corinthians 16:22; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Timothy 3:3, 6:10; Titus 2:4, 3:4, 3:15; Hebrews 13:1, 13:5; 1 Peter 1:22; 3 John 1:9; Revelation 3:19, 22:15.

Agapaô is used much more frequently: Matthew 5:43-44, 5:46, 6:24, 19:19, 22:37, 22:39, 24:12; Mark 10:21, 12:30-31, 12:33; Luke 6:27, 6:32, 6:35, 7:5, 7:42, 7:47, 10:27, 11:42-43, 16:13; John 3:16, 3:19, 3:35, 5:42, 8:42, 10:17, 11:5, 12:43, 13:1, 13:23, 13:34-35, 14:15, 14:21, 14:23-24, 14:28, 14:31, 15:9-10, 15:12-13, 15:17, 17:23-24, 17:26, 19:26, 21:7, 21:15-16, 21:20; Romans 5:5, 5:8, 8:28, 8:35, 8:37, 8:39, 9:13, 12:9, 13:8-10, 14:15, 15:30; 1 Corinthians 2:9, 4:21, 8:1, 8:3, 13:1-4, 13:8, 13:13, 14:1, 16:14, 16:24; 2 Corinthians 2:4, 2:8, 5:14, 6:6, 8:7-8, 8:24, 9:7, 11:11, 12:15, 13:11, 13:14; Galatians 2:20, 5:6, 5:13-14, 5:22; Ephesians 1:4, 1:15, 2:4, 3:17, 3:19, 4:2, 4:15-16, 5:2, 5:25, 5:28, 5:33, 6:23, 6:35; Philippians 1:9, 1:16, 2:1-2; Colossians 1:4, 1:8, 2:2, 3:14, 3:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 3:6, 3:12, 4:9, 5:8, 5:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 2:10, 2:16, 3:5; 1 Timothy 1:5, 1:14, 2:15, 4:12, 6:11; 2 Timothy 1:7, 1:13, 2:22, 3:10, 4:8, 4:10; Titus 2:2; Philemon 1:5, 1:7; Hebrews 1:9, 6:10, 10:24, 12:6; James 1:12, 2:5, 2:8; 1 Peter 1:8, 1:22, 2:17, 3:10, 4:8, 5:14; 2 Peter 1:7, 2:15; 1 John 2:5, 2:10, 2:15, 3:1, 3:10-11, 3:14, 3:16-18, 3:23, 4:7-12, 4:16-21, 5:1-3; 2 John 1:1, 1:3, 1:5-6; 3 John 1:1, 1:6; Jude 1:2, 1:12, 1:21; Revelation 1:5, 2:4, 2:19, 3:9, 12:11.

Both *agapaô* and *phileô* are used in a few verses: John 21:15-16; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22.

²⁴ For example, the Koran says: “We shall set up just scales on the Day of Resurrection, so that no man shall in the least be wronged. Actions as small as a grain of mustard seed shall be weighed out. Our reckoning shall suffice.” (21:47) And: “Yet you deny the Last Judgement. Surely there are guardians watching over you, noble recorders who know of all your actions. The righteous will surely dwell in bliss. But the wicked shall burn in Hell upon the Judgement-day: nor shall they ever escape from it.” (82:9-16) And further: “Those whose good deeds weigh heavy in the scales shall triumph, but those whose deeds are light shall forfeit their souls and abide in Hell for ever.” (23:102-103) See also,

18:49, 34:3-5, 69:18. Many verses warn that Allah is “stern” in punishing wrongdoers. See 2:196, 2:211, 3:11, 5:2, 5:73, 5:98, 40:22. (The quotations in this footnote are from *The Koran*, translated with notes by N. J. Dawood (Penguin Books, London, 1956-1999).)

²⁵ Grace means unmerited favor—that is, a kindness that we do not deserve.

²⁶ Ephesians 2:4-9; see also, Acts 15:11; Romans 3:24, 5:15, 5:17, 5:20-21, 11:6; Galatians 2:21; Ephesians 1:7; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 2:11, 3:5-7

²⁷ The Greek word which is translated “repent” is *metanoëō*, which means “to change one’s mind or purpose.” (See Strong’s Greek-Hebrew Dictionary, in *Bible Explorer 3 software*.) In short, repentance means to turn back to God. The New Testament teaches that repentance is the starting point for reconciliation with God. See Matthew 3:2, 4:17; Mark 1:4, 1:15, 6:12; Luke 3:3, 5:32, 13:3, 13:5, 15:7, 24:47; Acts 2:38, 3:19, 8:22, 13:24, 17:30, 19:4, 20:21, 26:20; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10; 2 Timothy 2:25; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 2:5, 2:16, 2:21-22, 3:3, 3:19, 9:20-21, 16:9, 16:11.

²⁸ When the New Testament talks of “faith” and “belief,” the Greek word is *pisteuō*, or its root word, *pistis*, which imply trust, commitment, or surrender. (See Strong’s Greek-Hebrew Dictionary, in *Bible Explorer 3 software*.) For a fuller discussion of the meaning of these words, see the article, “For God So Loved . . . Well, Wait a Minute,” at this web site.

²⁹ Mark 12:29-30; see also Matthew 22:36-38, and Deuteronomy 6:4-5, 13:3, 30:6.